



## Panama

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, with some qualifications, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 30,193 square miles and a population of 3.2 million. The Government does not collect statistics on religious affiliation, but various sources estimate that 75 to 85 percent of the population identifies itself as Roman Catholic and 15 to 25 percent as evangelical Christian. Smaller religious groups include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) with an estimated 42,000 members, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Episcopalians with between 7,000 and 10,000 members, Jewish and Muslim communities with approximately 10,000 members each, Hindus, Buddhists, Rastafarians, and other Christians. Local Baha'is maintain one of the world's seven Baha'i Houses of Worship. Indigenous religions include Ibeorgun (among Kuna) and Mamatata (among Ngobe).

Catholics are found throughout the country and at all levels of society. Evangelical Christians also are dispersed geographically and are becoming more prominent in society. The mainstream Protestant denominations, which include Southern Baptist Convention and other Baptist congregations, United Methodist, Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas, and Lutheran, derive their membership from the Antillean black and the expatriate communities, both of which are concentrated in Panama and Colón Provinces. The Jewish community is centered largely in Panama City. Muslims live primarily in Panama City and Colón, with a smaller but growing presence in David and other provincial cities. The vast majority of Muslims are of Lebanese, Palestinian, or Indian descent.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, provided that "Christian morality and public order" are respected, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

Catholicism enjoys certain state-sanctioned advantages over other faiths. The Constitution recognizes Catholicism as "the religion of the majority" of citizens but does not designate it as the official state religion.

The Government observes Good Friday and Christmas Day as national holidays.

The Constitution provides that religious associations have "juridical capacity" and are free to manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law, the same as other "juridical persons." The Ministry of Government and Justice grants "juridical personality" through a relatively simple and transparent process. Juridical personality allows a religious group to apply for all tax benefits available to nonprofit organizations. There were no reported cases of religious organizations being denied juridical personality or the associated tax benefits.

Most foreign religious workers are granted temporary 3-month missionary worker visas. A 12-month extension customarily is granted but could take several months. Foreign missionaries who intend to remain longer than 15 months must repeat the entire application process. Such additional extensions usually are granted. Catholic priests and nuns and Jewish rabbis are eligible for a special 5-year visa.

The Constitution dictates that Catholicism be taught in public schools; however, parents have the right to exempt their children from religious instruction. The numerical predominance of Catholicism and the consideration given to it in the Constitution generally have not prejudiced other religious groups.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

The Constitution limits public offices that religious leaders may hold to those related to social assistance, education, and scientific research.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Christian groups, including the Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Salvation Army, and Eastern Orthodox churches, participated in a successful ecumenical movement directed by the nongovernmental Panamanian Ecumenical Committee. Committee members also participated in an interreligious committee that included Jewish Reform, Islamic, Buddhist, Baha'i, Hindu, and Ibeorgun religious groups. The committee sponsored conferences to discuss matters of religious belief and practice. The committee was a member of the Panamanian Civil Society Assembly, an umbrella group of civic organizations that conducts informal governmental oversight.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy officials also met with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom.

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