

PANAMA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

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

Representatives of the U.S. embassy met regularly with Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim leaders to discuss issues of concern to these communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The population is 3.4 million, according to the 2010 census. The government does not collect statistics on religious affiliation, but various sources estimate that 75 to 85 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 15 to 25 percent is evangelical Christian. Smaller religious groups are found primarily in Panama City or larger urban areas. These include Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Buddhists, and Rastafarians. There are also active groups of evangelicals and Mormons in small towns. Baptists, Methodists, and Lutherans derive their membership in large part from the Afro-Antillean and expatriate communities.

The Jewish and Muslim communities have approximately 12,000 members each. The Jewish community is centered largely in Panama City. Muslims live primarily in Panama City and Colon. One of the world's seven Bahai houses of worship is in Panama City. Indigenous religions include Ibeorgun (among Kuna), Mamatata and Mamachi (among Ngobe Bugle), and Embera (among Embera), found in their respective indigenous communities throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution provides for freedom of religion, provided that “Christian morality and public order” are respected.

Catholicism has 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 constitution limits the public offices religious leaders may hold to those related to social assistance, education, and scientific research.

The constitution grants religious associations legal status so they may manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law, the same status granted other “juridical persons.” The Ministry of Government 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 associated tax benefits.

Under immigration law, most foreign religious workers are granted temporary missionary worker visas that must be renewed every two years for up to six years total. Catholic priests and nuns and Jewish rabbis are eligible for a special, automatic six-year visa.

The constitution required teaching Catholicism in public schools; however, parents have the right to exempt their children from religious instruction.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday and Christmas Day.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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Representatives of the U.S. embassy met regularly with Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim leaders to discuss issues of concern to these communities. The ambassador met with Catholic Archbishop Ulloa and the Inter-Religious Institute President and Bishop of the Methodist Church Pablo Morales. The ambassador also hosted a meeting with the president and rabbi of the Reformist Kol Shearith congregation and its members to hear their views about social challenges in the country. An ambassador-led embassy delegation attended a dinner to celebrate Ramadan at the Islamic Cultural Center in Colon, hosted by the local Muslim community in coordination with local authorities.