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## Suriname

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2010**

**November 17, 2010**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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 reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

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 63,037 square miles and a population of 524,000. According to the 2004 census, an estimated 27 percent of the inhabitants trace their ancestry to the Indian subcontinent, 18 percent identify themselves as Creoles of African descent, 15 percent claim Indonesian ancestry, and 15 percent are of Maroon descent (descendants of escaped slaves). Smaller percentages claim Chinese, Amerindian, Portuguese, Lebanese, or Dutch descent.

According to the census, 40.7 percent of the population is Christian, including Roman Catholics, and Protestants and other groups, among them Moravian, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, evangelical, Baptist, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons); 20 percent is Hindu, including the Sanathan Dharma and the Arya Dewaker; 13.5 percent is Muslim, including Sunni, Ahmadiyya, and the World Islamic Call Society; and 3.3 percent follow indigenous religions. Baha'is, Jews, Buddhists, Brahma Kumaris, and Hare Krishnas are also present. There are three Rastafarian organizations: Aya Bingi Order, 12th Tribe, and Bobo Shanti.

Indigenous religions are practiced by some Amerindian and Maroon populations. Some Amerindians, concentrated principally in the interior and to a lesser extent in coastal areas, practice shamanism through a medicine man (piaiman). Many Maroons, who inhabit the interior, worship nature through a practice that has no special name. Other Maroons, as well as some Creoles in urban areas, worship their ancestors through a rite called wintie. Citizens of Amerindian and

Maroon origin who identify themselves as Christian often follow indigenous religious customs also, with the tacit approval of their Christian church leaders.

There is a correlation between ethnicity and religious faith. Many political parties, including six of the eight governing coalition parties, have strong ethnic ties, and members tend to belong to the same religious group. For example, within the governing coalition, the majority of the membership of the mostly ethnic-Creole National Party of Suriname (NPS) is Moravian, members of the mostly ethnic-Indian United Reformed Party are Hindu, and those of the mostly ethnic-Javanese Pertjajah Luhur Party tend to be Muslim. However, parties have no requirement that political party leaders or members adhere to a particular religion. For example, the president of the country from 2000-10 and current leader of the NPS is a practicing Catholic.

There is no direct correlation between religious affiliation and socioeconomic status; however, those who practice indigenous religions in the small villages of the interior generally have a lower socioeconomic status. With the exception of those following indigenous practices, religious communities are not concentrated in any particular region.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The constitution permits individuals to choose or change their religion. The constitution categorizes the right to religious freedom as a "personal right and freedom" and states that any violation of these personal freedoms can be brought before a court of justice. The constitution provides that no individual shall be discriminated against on the grounds of his or her religion. The government does not favor a particular religion, and no tenets of a particular religion are codified in criminal or civil laws.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Holi Phagwa (Hindu), Good Friday (Christian), Easter Monday (Christian), Eid al-Fitr (Islamic), and Christmas (Christian). Persons of all religious groups tend to celebrate these holidays.

The government does not establish requirements for recognition of religious groups, nor are the latter required to register.

Religious instruction in public schools is permitted but not required. Schools offer religious instruction in a variety of faiths. Parents are not permitted to homeschool their children for religious or other reasons; however, they may enroll their children in private schools, many of which have a religious affiliation. Students in public schools are allowed to practice all elements of their religion, including wearing religious symbols; however, school administrators allegedly told some Rastafarian students that wearing dreadlocks was unacceptable and sent them home. The chair of the Rastamakandra Sranang Foundation said that despite this, the Rastafarians enjoy a good relationship with the Ministry of Education.

The government provides limited subsidies to a number of public elementary and secondary schools established and managed by various religious organizations. While the teachers are civil servants and the schools are public, religious groups provide all funding, with the exception of teachers' salaries and a small maintenance stipend for the schools.

The armed forces maintain a chaplaincy with Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic clergy available to military personnel of all religious groups. While the chaplaincy provides interfaith services, personnel are also welcome to attend outside religious services.

### 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 reporting period.

Rastafarians believe that marijuana use is necessary for their spiritual order, and that prohibition on its use is a form of discrimination.

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

### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

### 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, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The Inter-Religious Council in Suriname consists of representatives of five religious groups: two Hindu groups, two Muslim groups, and the Catholic Church. Council members meet monthly to discuss planned interfaith activities and their positions on government policies. The council is partially supported by, and consults with, the government. Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and Rastafarians also each have umbrella organizations that bring together congregations of the same faith.

### 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.

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