



## Suriname

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, 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 63,037 square miles and a population of 493,000. 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 recent census data, 40.7 percent of the population is Christian, including Roman Catholics and Protestant groups -- among them Moravian, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, Evangelical, Baptist, and Methodist; 20 percent is Hindu, 13.5 percent is Muslim, 3.3 percent follow indigenous religions, 15 percent claim to not know their religion, 4.4 percent claim no faith, and 2.5 percent declare unspecified faiths. Indigenous religions are practiced by the Amerindian and Afro-descendant Maroon populations. The Amerindians, concentrated principally in the interior and to a lesser extent in coastal areas, practice shamanism through a medicine man (piaiman). Maroons, who inhabit the interior, worship nature through a practice that has no special name, and they also worship their ancestors through a rite called wintie. Citizens of Amerindian and Maroon origin who classify themselves as Christian often simultaneously follow indigenous religious customs, with the acknowledgment of their Christian church leaders.

Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Baha'is, Jews, Buddhists, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and the World Islamic Call Society.

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 adhere to or practice one faith. For example, within the governing coalition, the majority of members 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 Pertjaja 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, who is also the 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 heavily concentrated in any particular region.

## Section II. Status of 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 law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and permits individuals to choose or change their religion. The Constitution categorizes the right to religious freedom as a "personal right and freedom." The Constitution states that any violation of these personal freedoms can be brought before a court of justice. The Government does not favor a particular religion, and no tenets of a particular religion have been codified into criminal or civil laws.

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

The Government does not establish requirements for recognition of religious faiths, nor are religious groups required to register with the Government.

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.

The government educational system 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 period covered by this report.

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.

There is an interreligious council composed of representatives of various religious groups. Council members meet at least twice per month to discuss planned interfaith activities and their position on government policies. The council is partially supported by and consults with the State. On March 12, 2008, in response to *Fitna*, a

film critical of the Koran and produced by Dutch opposition parliamentarian Geert Wilders, the council condemned the release of the film. On April 2, 2008, Islamic organizations in the country separately condemned the film. They claimed the movie characterized Islam incorrectly and said the legal basis for its release was based on an inappropriate interpretation of the right to freedom of speech. Both organizations also used the opportunity to call for all citizens to remain calm and exercise religious tolerance.

#### 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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