



Timor-Leste

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 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 5,406 square miles and a population of 1.1 million. According to a 2005 report from the World Bank, 98 percent of the population is Catholic, 1 percent Protestant, and less than 1 percent Muslim. Most citizens also retain some vestiges of animistic beliefs and practices, which they have come to regard as more cultural than religious.

The country had a significant Muslim population during the Indonesian occupation, composed mostly of ethnic Malay immigrants from Indonesian islands. There also were a few ethnic Timorese converts to Islam, as well as a small number descended from Arab Muslims living in the country while it was under Portuguese authority. The latter group was well integrated into society, but ethnic Malay Muslims often were not, and only a few hundred remained in the country following independence in 2002.

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.

There is no official state religion; however, Catholic values remain prominent in the political life of the country. After assuming the office of Prime Minister in July 2006, José Ramos-Horta repeatedly emphasized the importance of government consultation with the Catholic Church on all major decisions; however, members of Protestant and Muslim communities also have some political influence and have held high positions in the executive branch of the Government, military, and National Parliament.

In August 2007 the Ministry of Interior, the body formerly charged with registering religious organizations, was abolished and registration authority fell under the purview of the State Secretary for Public Security. During the period covered by this report, this agency had not yet developed registration procedures.

An October 2003 law on immigration and asylum states that "foreigners cannot provide religious assistance to

the Defense and Security Forces, except in cases of absolute need and urgency." Based in part on this law, immigration authorities established residence and visa fees for foreigners residing in the country. Missionaries and religious figures were exempt from paying these fees.

Police cadets receive training in equal enforcement of the law and nondiscrimination, including religious nondiscrimination.

The Government observes Good Friday, Assumption Day, All Saints' Day, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Christmas, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha as national holidays.

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. Attitudes toward the small Protestant and Muslim communities generally are friendly in the capital of Dili; however, outside of the capital, non-Catholic religious groups are sometimes viewed with suspicion.

In contrast with the previous reporting period, there were no reports of harassment of non-Catholic groups.

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. The U.S. Government regularly expresses support to government leaders for consolidation of constitutional democracy, including respect for basic human rights such as religious freedom.

In addition, the U.S. Government maintained a dialogue with members of the National Parliament during their deliberations on legislation affecting religious freedom. The U.S. Government supported the justice sector to encourage the development of judicial institutions that would promote the rule of law and ensure respect for religious freedom as guaranteed in the Constitution.

Released on September 19, 2008

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)

