

TIMOR-LESTE 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, although there was an ongoing issue with a local official who closed a church in 2011 without a clear legal basis.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and regularly expressed support to government leaders for consolidation of constitutional democracy, including respect for basic human rights such as religious freedom. Embassy representatives urged a local administrator to consider reopening a closed church.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2010 census, the population is 1,066,400, of which 96.8 percent are Roman Catholic, 2.2 percent Protestant, and less than 1 percent Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu. Protestant denominations include the Assemblies of God, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Christian Vision Church. There are also several small nondenominational Protestant congregations. Many citizens also retain animistic beliefs and practices, which they do not see as incompatible with their formal religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The law at all levels protects religious freedom against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There is no official state religion, but Catholic values remain prominent in the political life of the country.

The government provides some funding to religious organizations to support activities and help in the construction or rehabilitation of places of worship, usually on the basis of a request for assistance.

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

Since 2007 the secretary of state for security has had authority to register religious organizations; however, this agency had not developed registration procedures by year's end.

A 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," but this has not unduly restricted the work of religious missionaries. Missionaries and other religious figures are exempt from paying normal residence and visa fees, although some denominations have complained of long delays in the visa approval and renewal processes.

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

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government generally respected religious freedom in practice, but in one case failed to take action to uphold court rulings regarding religious freedom in a timely fashion.

In March 2009, a Protestant missionary church in Ainaro reported that members of a local Catholic youth group illegally locked its three churches to prevent services from being held. United Nations Police (UNPOL) and the National Police of Timor-Leste (PNTL) reportedly spoke with the instigators, who refused to remove the lock and said that the Protestant church should leave. The case was brought before a local court. The judge sent four orders for the churches to be reopened, but the PNTL never executed the judge's orders. The local district administrator reportedly sent a letter to the judge stating that he refused to accept the court orders to reopen the churches. In 2012, the district administrator agreed to unlock the churches and the parishioners began rehabilitating the buildings, but services had

not yet restarted at year's end, reportedly due to a lack of resources from the small congregations.

Government Inaction

There was an ongoing case in which a local district administrator decided to close a Protestant missionary church. Although the decision did not appear to have a clear legal basis, the government had not taken action by year's end to ensure the reopening of the church.

In December 2010, a group of agitators demanded the closure of a Protestant missionary church in Oecusse. Following a meeting of stakeholders in January 2011, the local district administrator ordered the provisional closure of the church on the grounds that the building was not approved for use as a place of worship. The administrator met several times with representatives of the church and invited them to conduct their activities in a different community, but at year's end the provisional order remained in effect.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Attitudes toward the small Protestant and Muslim communities generally were friendly in the capital of Dili; however, outside of the capital, non-Catholic religious groups were sometimes viewed with suspicion.

In October, a local community member set fire to a Protestant church in the Dili suburb of Hera. Police detained the suspected arsonist and his case was pending at year's end.

In March and June, a Protestant church in Maliana attempted to build a fence around its property, but desisted on both occasions when local community members made threats against the property.

There was one case of societal abuse dating from 2010 that was still in the judicial process at year's end. In October 2010, a group of local Catholics, including the village chief and lay religious leaders, reportedly burned down three local Protestant leaders' houses in Maliana. The houses, and a store attached to one of the houses, were looted before they were set on fire and money and goods were taken. The attacks occurred when the Protestant leaders were away and only women and children were home. The mob reportedly physically intimidated and

roughly handled the women and children before starting the fires. There were allegations that the PNTL had knowledge about the attack beforehand, but did nothing to prevent it. UNPOL officers were alerted during the attacks, but did nothing to stop them. Official complaints have been filed with the PNTL headquarters in Dili and with the UN human rights division. The prosecution finalized its investigation in December, but the trial had not yet begun by year's end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and regularly expressed support to government leaders for consolidation of constitutional democracy, including respect for basic human rights such as religious freedom. Embassy representatives met with the district administrator in Oecusse and urged him to reopen the closed church in a manner consistent with local law.

The ambassador and other embassy representatives encouraged the justice sector to develop institutions to promote the rule of law and ensure respect for religious freedom as provided in the constitution.

The ambassador hosted an iftar dinner in August with leaders from various faiths to discuss religious tolerance and appreciation for interfaith dialogue. In response to a letter from a local Muslim leader expressing anger at a film disseminated on the Internet that he found offensive to Muslims, the embassy wrote a letter underscoring the U.S. government's respect for Islam.