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## Trinidad and Tobago

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 1,980 square miles and a population of 1.3 million. Approximately 40 percent of the population is of African descent and 40 percent of East Indian descent. The balance is mostly of European, Syrian, Lebanese, Chinese, or mixed descent.

According to the latest unofficial estimates (2006), 26 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 24.6 percent Protestant (including 7.8 percent Anglican, 6.8 percent Pentecostal, 4 percent Seventh-day Adventist, 3.3 percent Presbyterian or Congregational, 1.8 percent Baptist, and 0.9 percent Methodist), 1.6 percent members of Jehovah's Witnesses, 22.5 percent Hindu, and 5.8 percent Muslim. Traditional Caribbean religious groups with African roots include the Spiritual Baptists (sometimes called Shouter Baptists), 5.4 percent, and the Orisha, 0.1 percent. Those listed as "other" account for 10.7 percent, which includes numerous small Christian groups as well as Baha'is, Rastafarians, Buddhists, and a very small number of Jews.

Afro-Trinidadians are predominantly Christian, with a small Muslim community, and are concentrated in and around Port of Spain and the east-west corridor of Trinidad. The population of Trinidad's sister island, Tobago, is overwhelmingly of African descent and predominantly Christian. Indo-Trinidadians are primarily concentrated in central and southern Trinidad

and are principally divided between the Hindu and Islamic religious groups, along with significant Presbyterian and some Catholic representation.

Ethnic and religious divisions are reflected in political life, with the People's National Movement party drawing much of its support from Afro-Trinidadians and many Indo-Trinidadians supporting the major parties of the new People's Partnership coalition government, which includes the United National Congress and the Congress of the People parties. The messages and ceremonies of political parties occasionally carried religious overtones; however, all parties professed to focus on issues and embrace all potential voters without reference to race, creed, or ethnic origin.

## 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.

To receive tax-exempt donations or gifts of land, or to perform marriages, religious groups must register with the government, which requires them to demonstrate that they are nonprofit organizations. Religious groups have the same rights and obligations as most legal entities, regardless of whether they are registered. They may own land, but they must pay property taxes; they may hire employees, but they must pay government-mandated employee benefits. Some religious groups register their organizations for increased visibility and to attract wider membership.

The government subsidizes both nondenominational public schools and religiously affiliated public schools (for example, Catholic, Hindu, and Islamic). The government permits religious instruction in nondenominational public schools, allocating time each week when any religious organization with an adherent in the school may provide an instructor. Attendance at these classes is voluntary, and the religious groups represented are diverse. Parents may enroll their children in private schools for religious reasons. Homeschooling is not allowed, since the Education Act mandates formal schooling for all children either in public or private schools.

The Ministry of Social Development is responsible for ecclesiastical affairs and administers annual financial grants to religious organizations. It also issues recommendations on land use by such organizations.

The law prohibits acts that would offend or insult another person or group on the basis of race, origin, or religion; or which would incite racial or religious hatred. The law also provides for prosecution for the desecration of any place of worship. Government officials routinely speak out against religious intolerance and do not publicly favor any religion. Judicial review is available to those who claim to be victims of religious discrimination.

The government established public holidays for every religious group with a large following. The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas (Christian); Divali (Hindu); and Eid al-Fitr (Islamic). In addition, the government recognizes Liberation Day, which is associated with the Spiritual Baptist religion. The government grants financial and technical assistance to various organizations to support religious celebrations.

The government does not formally sponsor programs that promote interfaith dialogue; however, it supports the activities of the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO). This organization is an interfaith coordinating committee for public outreach, governmental and media relations, and policy implementation. It also provides the prayer leader for several official events, such as the opening of parliament and the annual court term. The IRO liaises with the Ministry of Social Development as well as the Ministry of Education. The bylaws of the IRO do not exclude any religious groups from membership. Pentecostals and Seventh-day Adventists did not participate for doctrinal reasons.

Cabinet ministers, members of parliament, and public figures represented every major religious group and denomination and the broad spectrum of religious beliefs in the country. They often participated in the ceremonies and holidays of other religions and actively advocated religious tolerance and harmony.

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#### 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.

Missionaries must meet standard requirements for an entry visa and must represent a registered religious group. They may not remain more than three years per visit but may reenter after a year's absence. The government limited the number of foreign missionaries to 35 per religious group at any given time. Some religious groups had more than 35 missionaries present in the country because they had multiple nonprofit, religious organizations registered under the Companies Act. Although the government did not stringently enforce the act, it was under review, and some organizations voluntarily reduced their numbers of missionaries.

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.

#### 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. U.S. embassy officials maintained contact with most religious organizations and invited representatives to official functions.

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