



Trinidad and Tobago

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

October 26, 2009

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 a few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; however, 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.

The Catholic and Anglican churches noted a decline in church attendance and the number of priests.

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 governing People's National Movement (PNM) party drawing much of its support from Afro-Trinidadians and many Indo-Trinidadians supporting the main opposition party, the United National Congress (UNC), as well as the nonparliamentary opposition Congress of the People party. Religious overtones were sometimes present in the messages and ceremonies of the PNM and the UNC. 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. Political leaders attended celebrations of all groups and often delivered speeches on the need to respect all religious traditions.

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 can own land, but they must pay property taxes; they can 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 can 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 Christian holidays of Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas; the Hindu holiday of Diwali; and the Islamic holiday of Eid al-Fitr. 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.

A Hindu group that organizes the celebration of Phagwa (also known as Holi), a joyous celebration that marks the start of the Hindu New Year, complained about the level of government funding it received. The organization objected to the reduction of state funding from approximately \$12,500 (TT\$75,000) in 2007, to \$10,000 (TT\$60,000) in 2008, and finally to \$800 (TT\$5,000) in 2009. The group returned the 2009 grant in protest.

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.

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.

In May 2009, students of a nondenominational public school in south Trinidad participated in a Hindu prayer service and planted symbolic flags on the school grounds appealing for success in their examinations. The Ministry of Education ordered school authorities to remove the flags. The Minister stated that the Ministry promoted acceptance of religious diversity and the right of individuals to worship freely, but that a nondenominational public school should maintain a neutral environment. The decision of the Ministry offended some students and teachers, who declared that they would boycott classes and stand guard around the symbolic prayer flags. The school principal eventually removed the flags. More than half of the student body of 1,500 is Hindu.

Foreign missionaries operated freely. The Government limited the number of foreign missionaries to 30 per religious group at any given time. Missionaries must meet standard requirements for an entry visa and must represent a registered religious group. They may not remain for more than three years per visit but may reenter after a year's absence.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners 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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In August 2008, the Government changed the name of the country's highest award, formerly known as the Trinity Cross, to the Order of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, in response to a 2006 ruling that the Trinity Cross was a Christian symbol not representative of a pluralistic society. Many non-Christian citizens were previously unable or unwilling to accept the prestigious award.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were a few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; however, prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

In January 2009 a Roman Catholic school principal suspended a seven-year-old girl due to her traditional Rastafarian hairstyle. The student's attorney argued the right to education was constitutional, and since the school received government funding, it could not deny her access based on her hairstyle. The student was allowed to return to school, provided that she kept her hair "neat and tidy."

On August 8, 2008, unidentified vandals broke into a prominent Hindu temple in Cunupia, a town in central Trinidad. The vandals defiled religious idols. There was a similar incident one year earlier at a different Hindu temple also in central Trinidad. The Government publicly denounced these acts of vandalism. Police made no

arrests due to lack of evidence. The IRO believed the vandalism was part of an overall crime surge rather than religiously motivated.

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.