



Trinidad and Tobago

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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

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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 a few reports of societal abuses or discrimination possibly 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), 22.5 percent Hindu, and 5.8 percent Muslim. A small number of individuals are members of Jehovah's Witnesses, 1.6 percent, and traditional Caribbean religious groups with African roots, such as 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 governing People's National Movement (PNM) party drawing much of its support from Afro-Trinidadians, and many Indo-Trinidadians supporting the main opposition United National Congress (UNC) party as well as the breakaway opposition Congress of the People (COP) 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 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. Political leaders attended celebrations of all groups and often delivered speeches on religious tolerance.

To receive tax-exempt donations and 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 public and religiously affiliated schools. It permits religious instruction in public schools, setting aside a 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 grounds of race, origin, or religion, or which would incite racial or religious hatred, and it 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 Divali; and the Islamic holiday of Eid al-Fitr. In addition, the Government recognizes the Spiritual Baptist Liberation Day, associated with the Spiritual Baptist religion. The Government grants financial and technical assistance to various organizations to support religious festivals and 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 serves as 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 in its governmental relations. The by-laws of the IRO do not exclude any groups from membership; however, the 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 period covered by this report.

Foreign missionaries operated freely; however, 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 3 years per visit but may reenter after a year's absence.

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

In March 2008 officials at one high school in Central Trinidad ordered pupils to remove the raksha, a Hindu religious symbol consisting of a colored string worn on the wrist during the performance of sacred rituals and removed within 7 days after the prayers. The Ministry of Education subsequently apologized to the students and condemned the move to restrict the wearing of religious symbols. School officials justified their decision by stating that it related to dress code policies and not religious intolerance.

On December 12, 2007, a Muslim woman was excused from a pool of potential jurors after refusing to lift the veil on her burka to allow her face to be seen. Lacking a legal precedent, the matter was before the courts at the end of the reporting period. Some Muslim community leaders viewed the case as cultural, not religious.

In August 2007 vandals desecrated and attempted to burn a popular Hindu temple and tourist attraction. The Government and all the major religious organizations condemned the act. The police were unable to make any arrests due to lack of evidence and eyewitnesses.

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 Embassy maintained contact with most religious organizations and invited representatives to official functions.

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