

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO 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.

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 embassy continued an outreach program to various religious groups and included the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) in several official events, including a commemoration of the eleventh anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks. The embassy increased outreach to the Muslim community with a social media training program encouraging leadership and the free exchange of ideas among Muslim youth.

Section I. Religious Demography

The population is 1.3 million, according to the government's 2011 Population and Housing Preliminary Count. According to a 2011 estimate by the Central Statistical Office, 21.6 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 26.2 percent Protestant (including 5.7 percent Anglican, 12 percent Pentecostal or evangelical, 4.1 percent Seventh-day Adventist, 2.5 percent Presbyterian or Congregational, 1.2 percent Baptist, and 0.7 percent Methodist), 1.5 percent Jehovah's Witnesses, 18.2 percent Hindu, and 5 percent Muslim. Traditional Caribbean religious groups with African roots include the Spiritual Baptists (sometimes called Shouter Baptists) representing 5.7 percent of the population and the Orisha at 0.9 percent. The remainder of the population is listed as "none," "not stated," or "other," which includes a number of small Christian groups, as well as Bahais, Rastafarians, Buddhists, and 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 northern Trinidad. The population of Trinidad's sister island, Tobago, is overwhelmingly of African descent and predominantly Christian. Indo-

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Trinidadians are primarily concentrated in central and southern Trinidad and are mostly Hindu, but there are also Muslims, Presbyterians, and Catholics.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The anti-blasphemy law is not enforced.

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, schools operated by Catholic, Hindu, and Islamic groups). The government permits religious instruction in nondenominational public schools, allocating time each week when any religious group 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. The Education Act mandates formal schooling for all children either in public or private schools, and does not permit homeschooling.

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

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 publicly against religious intolerance and do not publicly favor any religion. Judicial review is available to those who claim to be victims of religious discrimination.

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Missionaries must meet standard requirements for entry visas and must represent a religious group registered according to the law. They may not remain more than three years per visit, but may reenter after a year's absence.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, Corpus Christi, Christmas, Diwali, and Eid al-Fitr. There is also a public holiday recognizing the repeal of colonial-era laws that prohibited the practice of the Shouter/Spiritual Baptist faith.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

During a three-month state of emergency declared by parliament in 2011, authorities arrested 16 Muslim men who were allegedly plotting to assassinate the prime minister and three other cabinet ministers. The government never charged the men with any crime and released them after one week. During the year, Muslims referred to this incident as an example of bias against the Muslim community. Several of those arrested claimed to be pursuing legal action against the government for wrongful arrest.

The government limited the number of foreign missionaries to 35 per registered religious group at any given time. Nonetheless, some international religious groups or denominations reportedly maintained more than 35 total missionaries in the country if they were affiliated with more than one registered group, including registered nonprofits and charities.

The government did not formally sponsor programs promoting interfaith dialogue, but it supported IRO activities. As an interfaith coordinating committee for public outreach, governmental and media relations, and policy implementation, the IRO also provided the prayer leader for several official events, such as the opening of parliament and the annual court term. IRO bylaws did not exclude any religious groups from membership, although representatives of Pentecostal and Seventh-day Adventist groups 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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The government granted financial and technical assistance to various organizations to support religious celebrations.

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. The prime minister issued public statements acknowledging the celebration of major religious holidays, including Ramadan, Easter, and Diwali.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The embassy continued outreach to various religious groups, and included the IRO and religious leaders in official events. The president of the IRO served as a featured speaker at the commemoration and memorial service on the eleventh anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks. The ambassador and embassy representatives met with leaders of various religious organizations, and visited a number of religious services and sites.

The embassy increased outreach to the Muslim community with a social media training program encouraging leadership and the free exchange of ideas among Muslim youth. In addition, embassy staff met regularly with Muslim religious and civil society leaders.