



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Guyana

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

Despite ethnic tensions, the generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 83,000 square miles and a population of approximately 751,000. The country is religiously and ethnically diverse. Nearly half of the population could trace its ancestry to the Indian subcontinent, and more than one-third of the population was of African descent. These two ethnicities, along with smaller native South American groups and persons of European and Chinese descent, practiced a wide range of religions.

Data from a 2002 census on religious affiliation indicated that approximately 57 percent of the population was Christian, including the following faiths: 17 percent Pentecostal, 8 percent Roman Catholic, 7 percent Anglican, 5 percent Seventh-day Adventist, and 20 percent other Christian faiths. Approximately 28 percent was Hindu, an estimated 7 percent was Muslim (both Sunni and Shi'a), and 2 percent practiced other beliefs, including Rastafarianism and Baha'ism. Approximately 4 percent of the population did not profess any religion.

Members of all ethnic groups were well represented in all religious groups, with two exceptions: almost all Hindus were Indo-Guyanese, and nearly all Rastafarians were Afro-Guyanese. Foreign missionaries from a wide range of denominations were present.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy/Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

Members of all religious groups were allowed to worship freely. There is no state or otherwise dominant religion, and the Government practiced no form of religious favoritism or discrimination.

The Government recognizes religious groups of all faiths present in the country. All such groups are required to register with the Government to receive formal recognition. Religious groups seeking to establish operations require permission from the Ministry of Home Affairs before commencing their activities. This permission does not allow access to the interior; for such access, all nonofficial persons not resident in the interior require special permission from the Ministries of Home Affairs and of Amerindian Affairs. The ministries review the scope of proposed activities submitted by a religious body and grant approval on a case-by-case basis. There is no formal monitoring of religious groups.

The following holy days are national holidays: Christian--Good Friday, Easter, and Christmas; Hindu--Phagwah and Diwali; Muslim--the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad and Eid Al-Adha.

Both public and religiously affiliated schools exist, and parents are free to send their children to the school of their choice without sanction or restriction. The Government imposes no requirements regarding religion for any official or nonofficial purposes.

The Government promoted cooperation among religious communities to address long-standing racial tensions. In early 2004 the president announced that the Government would provide financial support, including no-cost spectrum on the radio frequency band, for an all-faith television station. The Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), a nongovernmental umbrella organization for Christian, Hindu, and Muslim organizations, was mandated to work out the modalities for establishing such a station. The IRO's activities were somewhat limited due to infrequent meetings, and not all denominations were represented in its voluntary membership. At the end of the period covered by this report, the IRO had completed a proposal for an all-faith television station, but the Government had not acted on it.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Guyana Defense Force (GDF) did not have a chaplaincy; however, efforts were made to coordinate with civilian religious groups to provide personnel with access to religious services. Leaders of all major faiths provided prayer and counseling, although generally only Christian sermons were given on GDF bases. Attendance at religious services depended on the discretion of individual commanders, although in many cases it was mandatory. Membership in a particular religion did not confer any advantage or disadvantage; however, general military practice tended to be biased in favor of Christians. For example, no allowance was made for Muslim observance of Friday as a special prayer day, nor was provision made for Hindu dietary preferences.

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

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Although significant problems existed between the country's two main ethnic groups, tensions were generally racially, not religiously, based. Religious leaders frequently have worked together to attempt to bridge these differences. Despite its limitations, the IRO took a prominent role in trying to reduce tensions in the period before the 2006 national elections. It organized a peace march that took place on January 16, 2006, and a code of conduct for the parties contesting the elections to sign on May 2, 2006.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. ambassador and other embassy officials met on numerous occasions with leaders of religious groups and with foreign missionaries. The embassy continued to pursue a policy of active engagement with the Islamic community. The ambassador and other embassy officials spoke before various religious groups promoting religious and racial harmony.

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