



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Panama

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, with some qualifications, 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.

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 30,193 square miles and a population of approximately 3.2 million. The Government does not collect statistics on the religious affiliation of its citizens, but various sources estimated that 80 to 85 percent of the population identified itself as Roman Catholic and 15 percent as evangelical Christian. A 2003 CID-Gallup poll indicated that approximately 24 percent of the adult population was evangelical Christian. Smaller religious groups included the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) with an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 members, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Episcopalians with between 7,000 and 10,000 members, Jewish and Muslim communities with approximately 10,000 members each, Hindus, Buddhists, and other Christians. The Baha'is maintained one of the world's seven Baha'i Houses of Worship in the country. Indigenous religions included Ibeorgun (among Kuna) and Mamatata (among Ngobe). There was also a small number of Rastafarians.

Members of the Catholic faith were found throughout the country and at all levels of society. Evangelical Christians also were dispersed geographically and were becoming more prominent in society. The mainstream Protestant denominations, which included Southern Baptist Convention and other Baptist congregations, United Methodist, Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas, and Lutheran, derived their membership from the Antillean black and the expatriate communities, both of which were concentrated in Panama and Colon Provinces. The Jewish community was concentrated largely in Panama City. Muslims lived primarily in Panama City and Colon, with smaller but growing concentrations in David and other provincial cities. The vast majority of Muslims were of Lebanese, Palestinian, or Indian descent.

Several religious organizations had foreign religious workers in the country. The Mormon Church had the largest number. Lutherans, the Southern Baptist Convention, Seventh-day Adventists, and Episcopalians each had a much smaller number of missionaries; many were from other Latin American countries.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, provided that "Christian morality and public order" are respected, 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.

Catholicism enjoys certain state-sanctioned advantages over other faiths. The constitution recognizes Catholicism as "the religion of the majority" of citizens but it does not designate it as the official state religion.

The Christian holy days of Good Friday and Christmas Day are national holidays.

The constitution provides that religious associations have "juridical capacity" and are free to manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law, the same as other "juridical persons." The Ministry of Government and Justice grants "juridical personality" through a relatively simple and transparent process. Juridical personality allows a religious group to apply for all tax benefits available to nonprofit organizations. There were no reported cases of religious organizations being denied juridical personality or the associated tax benefits.

Most foreign religious workers are granted temporary three-month missionary worker visas. A one-year extension customarily is granted, but one religious group complained that the extension could take up to four months. Foreign missionaries who intend to remain longer than

fifteen months must repeat the entire application process. Such additional extensions usually are granted. Catholic priests and nuns and Jewish rabbis are eligible for a special five-year visa.

The constitution dictates that Catholicism be taught in public schools; however, parents have the right to exempt their children from religious instruction. The numerical predominance of Catholicism and the consideration given to it in the constitution generally have not prejudiced other religions.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

The constitution limits the type of public offices that religious leaders may hold to those related to social assistance, education, or scientific research.

During the period covered by this report, the Ombudsman's Office mediated the case of four Rastafarian children denied access to public school because they refused to cut their hair. A similar complaint occurred in the previous period. According to the ombudsman, the children were allowed to return to school without having to cut their hair.

A Protestant group reported that the Government had been selectively applying the requirements for religious worker visas to favor some groups over others. The Protestant and other groups complained to the Government, and by the end of the period covered by this report, officials had resolved the problem.

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.

Christian groups, including the Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterian, Salvation Army, and Eastern Orthodox churches, participated in a successful ecumenical movement directed by the nongovernmental Panamanian Ecumenical Committee. The committee members also had an interreligious committee that included Jewish Reform, Islamic, Buddhist, Baha'i, Hindu, and Ibeorgun religious groups. The committee sponsored conferences to discuss matters of faith and practice and planned joint liturgical celebrations and charitable projects. The committee was a member of the Panamanian Civil Society Assembly, an umbrella group of civic organizations that conducts informal governmental oversight and has been the driving force behind ethical pacts on the treatment of women and youth, civil society, responsible journalism, and decentralization.

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. embassy continued its outreach efforts to the Muslim communities by hosting two dinners at the ambassador's residence to observe Islamic holy days and two meetings to discuss problems encountered at U.S. airports by Muslims. In addition, an embassy delegation visited the Arab community center and mosque in Colon.

The ambassador hosted a Purim dinner for the Jewish community, and embassy officials attended Holocaust remembrance services. They also took part in events marking the visit of the Patriarch of Constantinople to Panama's Eastern Orthodox community. The ambassador and embassy officers met with world leaders of the Jewish B'nai B'rith organization who were in the country in June 2006 for their annual conference.

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