



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Suriname

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.

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 63,037 square miles and a population of approximately 493,000. According to the 2004 census, an estimated 27 percent of the inhabitants traced their ancestry to the Indian subcontinent, another 18 percent identified themselves as Creoles of African descent, 15 percent claimed Indonesian ancestry, and 15 percent were of maroon descent, or descendants of escaped slaves. Smaller percentages of the population claimed Chinese, Amerindian, Portuguese, Lebanese, or Dutch descent.

According to recent census data, 40.7 percent of the population was Christian, including Roman Catholics and other Protestant groups--among them Moravians, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, evangelical, Baptist, and Methodist; 20 percent was Hindu, 13.5 percent was Muslim, 3.3 percent followed indigenous religions, 15 percent claimed to not know their religion, 4.4 percent claimed no faith, and 2.5 percent declared other, unspecified faiths. Indigenous religions were practiced by the Amerindians and the Afro-descendant maroon populations. The Amerindians, concentrated principally in the interior and to a lesser extent in coastal areas, practiced shamanism, a worship of all living things, through a medicine man, or *piaiman*. Maroons, who inhabited the interior, worshipped nature through a practice that had no special name, and they also worshipped their ancestors through a rite called *wintie*. Citizens of Amerindian and maroon origin who classified themselves as Christian often simultaneously followed indigenous religious customs, which was known to and accepted by their Christian church leaders.

The Jewish community numbered 150, and there were small numbers of Baha'is and Buddhists. There were also other groups, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the World Islamic Call Society.

Several Christian denominations, including Canadian and U.S.-based church groups, operated missionary programs throughout the country. There were an estimated twenty U.S. missionaries; approximately 90 percent were affiliated with the Baptist or Wesleyan Methodist churches.

Many political parties had strong ethnic ties, and members tended to adhere to or practice one faith. Six of the eight governing coalition parties were ethnically based. For example, within the governing coalition, the majority of members of the mostly Creole National Party of Suriname were Moravian, members of the mostly ethnic Indian United Reformed Party were Hindu, and those of the mostly ethnic Javanese Pertjaja Luhur Party tended to be Muslim. However, parties had no requirement that political party leaders or members adhere to a particular religion.

There was no direct correlation between religious affiliation and socioeconomic status; however, those who practiced indigenous religions in the small villages of the interior generally had a lower socioeconomic status. With the exception of those following indigenous practices, religious communities were not concentrated in any particular region of the country.

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.

There are five holy days that are celebrated as official holidays: Holi Phagwa (Hindu), Good Friday (Christian), Easter Monday (Christian), Eid al-Fitr (Muslim), and Christmas (Christian). Citizens of all faiths tended to celebrate these holidays.

The Government does not establish requirements for recognition of religious faiths, nor are religious groups required to register with the Government.

Aside from the standard requirement for an entry visa, foreign missionaries face no special restrictions.

The armed forces maintain a chaplaincy with Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic clergy available to military personnel of all faiths. While the chaplaincy provides interfaith services, personnel are also welcome to attend outside religious services.

The government education system provides limited subsidies to a number of public elementary and secondary schools established and managed by various religious organizations. While the teachers are civil servants and the schools are public, religious groups provide all funding with the exception of teachers' salaries and a small maintenance stipend. Religious instruction in public schools is permitted but not required for all students. Schools offer religious instruction in a variety of faiths.

Parents are not permitted to home school their children for religious or other reasons; however, they may enroll their children in private schools, many of which have a religious affiliation. Students in public schools are allowed to practice all elements of their faith, including wearing headscarves, crosses, or yarmulkes.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

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. Most citizens, particularly those living in the capital of Paramaribo, celebrated to varying degrees the religious holidays of other groups.

There is an interreligious council composed of representatives of various religious groups. Council members meet at least twice per month to discuss planned ecumenical activities and their position on government policies.

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 maintained a regular dialogue with leaders of various religious communities.

Following the 2006 controversy and subsequent violence surrounding a Danish cartoon depicting the Prophet Muhammad, embassy officials engaged in a dialogue with one of the largest Islamic organizations in the country to discuss freedom of religion in the context of human rights. In February 2006 the embassy delivered equipment worth approximately \$30,000 (84,000 Surinamese dollars) to support a project to preserve Moravian church archives.

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