



Timor-Leste

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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

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 by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

There were minimal reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

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 5,406 square miles and shares the island of Timor with Indonesia's Nusa Tenggara Timur Province. The estimated population of the territory was 1,063,000 as of July 2006. The overwhelming majority of the population is Catholic, and the Catholic Church is the dominant religious institution. There are also small Protestant and Muslim communities.

According to a 2005 World Bank report, 98 percent of the population is Catholic, 1 percent Protestant, and less than 1 percent Muslim. Most citizens also retain some vestiges of animistic beliefs and practices, which they have come to regard as more cultural than religious.

The number of Protestants and Muslims declined significantly after September 1999 because these groups were disproportionately represented among supporters of integration with Indonesia and among the Indonesian civil servants assigned to work in the province from other parts of Indonesia, many of whom left the country in 1999. The Indonesian military forces formerly stationed in the country included a significant number of Protestants, who played a major role in establishing Protestant churches in the territory. Fewer than half of those congregations existed after September 1999, and many Protestants were among those who remained in West Timor. The Assemblies of God is the largest and most active of the Protestant denominations.

The country had a significant Muslim population during the Indonesian occupation, composed mostly of ethnic Malay immigrants from Indonesian islands. There were also a few ethnic Timorese converts to Islam, as well as a small number descended from Arab Muslims living in the country while it was under Portuguese authority. The latter group was well integrated into society, but ethnic Malay Muslims at times were not. Only a small number of ethnic Malay Muslims remained.

Domestic and foreign missionary groups operated freely.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Although the Constitution became effective in 2002, the Government has continued to enforce some Indonesian laws and United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) regulations not yet superseded by the Constitution or national legislation. The Constitution provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship for all persons and stipulates that no one shall be persecuted or discriminated against on the basis of religious convictions. The Government

generally protected this right. Police cadets receive training in equal enforcement of the law and nondiscrimination.

In 2003 a law on immigration and asylum went into effect that includes two articles concerning religion. The first article requires religious associations to register with the Minister of Interior if most or all members are foreigners. Registration entails submitting documents setting forth objectives, statutes, or bylaws, and a membership list. At least one established foreign Protestant group reported that it had trouble registering due to bureaucratic obstruction. The second provision states that "foreigners cannot provide religious assistance to the Defense and Security Forces, except in cases of absolute need and urgency." Based in part upon this law, immigration authorities established residence and visa fees for foreigners residing in the country.

There is no official state religion, although Catholicism remains dominant. Most designated public holidays are Catholic holy days, including Good Friday, Assumption Day, All Saints' Day, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and Christmas.

In 2005 the Government established a consultative body on religious education in public schools. The consultative body consisting of members of the Government and religious organizations met in 2006 but produced no concrete results.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The strong and pervasive influence of the Catholic Church may sometimes affect the decisions of government officials. Given the dominant role in society of the Catholic Church, its leaders often play important roles in public debate and discussion. After assuming the office of Prime Minister in July 2006, José Ramos-Horta repeatedly emphasized the importance of government consultation with the Catholic Church on all major decisions; however, members of Protestant churches and the Islamic community also have some political influence and have held high positions in the executive branch of government, the military, and the National Parliament.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversions

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 minimal reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

The Catholic Church is the dominant religious institution, and its priests and bishops are accorded the highest respect in local society. Attitudes toward the small Protestant and Muslim communities generally are friendly in the capital of Dili, despite the past association of these groups with the occupying Indonesian forces. Outside of the capital, non-Catholic religious groups sometimes have been viewed with suspicion.

Some Muslim groups have at times been victims of harassment.

Non-Catholic Christian groups operating in the countryside also reported that their ministries sometimes encountered hostility. These tensions at times escalated into incidents of harassment and low-level violence, primarily in more remote communities in the districts. According to Protestant leaders, individuals converting from Catholicism to Protestantism were subject to harassment by family members and neighbors, and in some cases clergy and missionaries were threatened or assaulted. In several instances village leaders refused to allow missionaries to proselytize in their villages, and in at least one case a Protestant group was unable to build a chapel because of opposition from neighbors and local officials. Most Protestant leaders reported that Catholic Church officials and government authorities were helpful in resolving disputes and conflicts when they occurred.

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. Government regularly expresses support to government leaders for consolidation of constitutional democracy, including respect for basic human rights such as religious freedom.

In addition the U.S. Government maintained a dialogue with Members of Parliament during their deliberations on legislation affecting religious freedom. The U.S. Government supported the justice sector to encourage the development of judicial institutions that would promote the rule of law and ensure respect for religious freedom as guaranteed in the Constitution.

Released on September 14, 2007

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