



Trinidad and Tobago

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 no 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 1,980 square miles and a population of 1.3 million. Approximately 40 percent of the population is of African descent and 40 percent of East Indian descent. The balance is mostly of European, Syrian, Lebanese, or Chinese descent.

According to the latest unofficial estimates (2006), 26 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 24.6 percent Protestant (including 7.8 percent Anglican, 6.8 percent Pentecostal, 4 percent Seventh-day Adventist, 3.3 percent Presbyterian or Congregational, 1.8 percent Baptist, and 0.9 percent Methodist), 22.5 percent Hindu, and 5.8 percent Muslim. A small number of individuals belong to traditional Caribbean religious groups with African roots, such as the Spiritual Baptists (sometimes called Shouter Baptists), 5.4 percent, and the Orisha, 0.1 percent. The smaller groups are Jehovah's Witnesses (1.6 percent) and atheists (1.9 percent). Those listed as "other" account for 10.7 percent, which includes numerous small Christian groups as well as Baha'is, 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 Trinidad. The population of Trinidad's sister island, Tobago, is overwhelmingly of African descent and predominantly Christian. Indo-Trinidadians are primarily concentrated in central and southern Trinidad and are principally divided between the Hindu and Islamic religious groups, along with significant Presbyterian and some Catholic representation.

Ethnic and religious divisions are reflected in political life, with most Afro-Trinidadians voting for the governing People's National Movement (PNM) party, and most Indo-Trinidadians supporting the main opposition United National Congress (UNC) party as well as the breakaway opposition Congress of the People (COP) party. Religious overtones were sometimes present in the messages and ceremonies of the PNM and particularly of the UNC, which occasionally incorporated Hindu references and cultural expressions into its public events. However, the COP's professed goal was to focus on issues and embrace all potential voters without reference to race, creed or ethnic origin.

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.

To receive tax-exempt donations and 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 can own land, but they must pay property taxes; they can 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 public and religiously affiliated schools. It permits religious instruction in public schools, setting aside a time each week when any religious organization with an adherent in the school can 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. Homeschooling is not allowed, since the Education Act mandates formal schooling for all children, whether in public or private schools.

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

The law prohibits acts that would offend or insult another person or group on the grounds of race, origin, or religion, or which would incite racial or religious hatred, and it provides for prosecution of the desecration of any place of worship. Government officials routinely speak out against religious intolerance and generally do not publicly favor any religion. Judicial review is available to those who claim to be victims of religious discrimination.

The Government established public holidays for every religious group with a large following. The Christian holidays are Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas; the Hindu holiday is Divali; and the Islamic holiday is Eid al-Fitr. In addition, the Government recognizes the Spiritual Baptist Liberation Day, associated with the Spiritual Baptist religion. The Government grants financial and technical assistance to various organizations to support religious festivals and celebrations.

The Government does not formally sponsor programs that promote interfaith dialogue; however, it supports the activities of the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO). This organization serves as an interfaith coordinating committee for public outreach, governmental and media relations, and policy implementation. It also provides the prayer leader for several official events, such as the opening of Parliament and the annual court term. The IRO liaises with the Ministry of Social Development as well as the Ministry of Education in its governmental relations.

Ministers, Members of Parliament, and public figures represented every 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 preached religious tolerance and harmony.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Foreign missionaries operated freely; however, the Government limited the number of foreign missionaries to 30 per religious group at any given time. Missionaries must meet standard requirements for an entry visa and must represent a registered religious group. They may not remain for more than 3 years per visit but may reenter after a year's absence.

Members of the military are predominantly Afro-Trinidadian and Christian, and the military maintains a part-time chaplain to provide Christian religious services. Military personnel also have access to other religious services in their local communities.

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

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. Society is multiethnic and multireligious, and religious tolerance is instilled very early in life. Political leaders attended celebrations of all groups and often delivered speeches on religious tolerance that highlight the country's diversity.

The IRO, which was composed of leaders of nearly all religious groups with significant followings, promoted interfaith dialogue and tolerance through study groups, publications, and cultural and religious exhibitions. The bylaws of the IRO do not exclude any groups from membership. However, the Pentecostals and Seventh-day Adventists did not participate for doctrinal reasons.

Occasionally, a religious group complained about conversion efforts undertaken in neighborhoods that predominantly belonged to another faith. Most commonly, Hindu religious leaders raised this complaint against evangelical and Pentecostal Christians. These complaints may stem from underlying ethnic tensions between the Afro-Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian communities.

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 Embassy maintained contacts with most congregations and invited representatives to official functions.

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