



East Timor

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects 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 religions 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 5,406 square miles and shares the island of Timor with Indonesia's Nusa Tenggara Timur Province. According to the most recent statistics available from the World Bank, the population of the territory was approximately 925,000. An overwhelming majority of the population is Catholic, and the Catholic Church is the dominant religious institution. Attitudes toward the small Protestant and Muslim communities are generally tolerant.

In a United Nations-administered consultation vote in 1999, an overwhelming majority of East Timorese voted against autonomy and, in effect, for independence from Indonesia. As a result, Indonesian forces began a violent withdrawal from East Timor that forced approximately 200,000 persons to flee across the border to West Timor. The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) subsequently governed the country from October 1999, until independence in May 2002.

According to a 2003 report from the Asia Foundation, 98 percent of the population is Catholic, 1 percent Protestant, and 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 has declined significantly since 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 still existed after September 1999, and many Protestants are among those who have 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 also are a few ethnic Timorese converts to Islam, as well as a small number who 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 often were not. Only a few hundred of the latter remain in the country.

Domestic and foreign Catholic and Protestant missionary groups. Missionaries and other religious officials of all religions who come to the country for religious purposes are exempt from paying visa fees.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Although the Constitution became effective in 2002, the Government continued to enforce some Indonesian laws and 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, although the police force and legal system were slow to respond to allegations of criminal acts against members of minority religious groups. Police cadets receive training in equal enforcement of the law and nondiscrimination, including religious nondiscrimination.

In October 2003, a law on immigration and asylum went into effect that contains two articles concerning religion. The first requires religious associations to register with the Minister of Interior if most or all of the their members are foreigners; registration entails submitting documents setting forth objectives, statutes or bylaws, and a membership list. The second provision provides 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. Missionaries and religious figures have been exempted.

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.

The question of religious education in public schools led to one of the most vigorous public debates since independence. In February 2005, the Government shifted religious education from the core curriculum and made it an after-school elective without state funding. Two Catholic bishops issued a pastoral note in response, stating that religious education should be part of the core curriculum, although parents should be able to exempt their children from such instruction. The note also asked the Government not to make major decisions on issues important to the Catholic Church without prior consultation. Government leaders responded that they would engage in dialogue with the Church on religious education only after the new curriculum had been implemented. The bishops responded by organizing a mass demonstration that lasted almost 3 weeks with approximately 10,000 participants, the largest public protest since independence. The standoff ended when the Church and Government signed an accord reinserting religious education into the core curriculum. The agreement also establishes a consultative body consisting of members of the Government and religious organizations. In June 2005, the council had its first meeting to establish the framework for future consultations. Members of other religions were welcomed, and representatives of the Catholic, Protestant, Muslim communities attended.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion; however, incidents of violence against certain religious groups have occurred in the past, and there were several reports of attacks on such groups during the period covered by this report.

The strong and pervasive influence of the Catholic Church may sometimes affect the decisions of government officials. However, members of Protestant churches and the Islamic community also have some political influence and hold high positions in the executive branch of Government, the military, and the National Parliament.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

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 at times have been victims of harassment. In December 2004, nearly all remaining ethnic Malay Muslims, who had been residing in Dili's main mosque, were deported for violation of immigration laws. The 300 Malays were given several opportunities to relocate and normalize their residency status, but mosque leaders refused. The group was deported to Indonesian West Timor and reports indicate that many of them returned to their traditional homes in Java and Sumatra. These ethnic Malay Muslims feared integration into the community at large. Their occupation of the Dili mosque created tensions with Muslims of Arab descent. Despite some press reports to the contrary, religion was not at the core of the dispute. Rather, it stemmed chiefly from disagreements within the Muslim community about property rights and from the disputed citizenship claims of long-time ethnic Malay residents.

At times non-Catholic Christian groups also have been harassed. According to Protestant leaders, individuals converting from Catholicism to Protestantism often were subject to harassment by family members and neighbors, and in some cases, clergy and missionaries have been threatened or assaulted. In several instances, village leaders have 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 stiff opposition from neighbors and local officials. Most Protestant leaders report that Catholic Church officials and government authorities have been helpful in resolving disputes and conflicts when they occur.

During 2004, in the Maubara region, local residents reportedly became angry due to the number of persons Brazilian Protestant evangelists had converted from Catholicism. Individuals in the area complained that these evangelists had provided monetary loans and material goods to those who joined their church.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Government regularly expresses support to the leaders of the Government 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 will promote the rule of law and ensure respect for religious freedom as guaranteed in the Constitution. In July 2004, the U.S. Embassy hosted an interfaith dialogue during which representatives of all major religious groups met and discussed issues of religious freedom.

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