



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Belize

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 8,867 square miles and a population estimated at 290,000. There was a growing mestizo population (48.7 percent), a diminishing Creole component (24.9 percent), a stable Mayan element (10.6 percent), and a Garifuna component (6.1 percent). The balance of the population (9.7 percent) included Europeans, East Indians, Chinese, Arabs, and North Americans.

According to a 2000 census, Roman Catholics constituted 49.6 percent of the population, Pentecostals 7.4 percent, and Anglicans 5.3 percent. Other faiths and denominations included Baptists (3.5 percent), Methodists (3.5 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (5.2 percent), and Mennonites (4.1 percent). There were approximately 6,000 Nazarenes and modest numbers of Hindus, Baha'is, Buddhists, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Muslims, Rastafarians, and Salvation Army members. Except for the Mennonites and Pentecostals, who lived mostly in the rural districts of Cayo and Orange Walk, members of these minority groups tended to live in Belize City. Catholics were numerous throughout the country and constituted the majority faith in all but two of the country's six districts, Belize and Cayo, where they held a plurality of the population but did not constitute a majority. Approximately 10 percent of citizens identified themselves as nonbelievers or members of no religious congregation.

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 is no state religion; however, the preamble to the constitution reads that "the nation of Belize shall be founded upon principles which acknowledge the supremacy of God." A 2002 amendment to the constitution expanded the appointed senate to twelve persons, one of whom is appointed by the governor general acting in accordance with the advice of the Belize Council of Churches and the Evangelical Association of Churches. The membership of these organizations includes several Christian denominations, among them Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Seventh-day Adventist.

Under the constitution, freedom of religion is part of a broader protection--that of freedom of conscience. In addition, the constitution provides that no one shall be compelled to take an oath that is contrary to a person's religion or belief. Discrimination on religious grounds is illegal and rarely occurs. To help maintain religious harmony, the constitution reserves the right of the Government to intervene in religious matters "for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedoms of other persons," including the right to observe and practice any religion "without the unsolicited intervention of members of any other religion."

The traditional Christian holy days of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Monday, and Christmas are observed as national holidays.

There are no special registration requirements or fees for religious organizations, and legal incorporation for a religion or denomination is a simple matter. Property taxes are not levied against churches and other places of worship. However, property taxes are levied against other church-owned buildings occupied on a regular basis, such as the pastor's or priest's residence.

Foreign religious workers are permitted to enter the country and proselytize; however, they must be registered and purchase a religious worker's permit. The yearly fee is modest.

The constitution stipulates that religious communities may establish "places of education" and states that "no such community shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for persons of that community." Although there is no state religion, the educational system maintains by statute a strong religious curriculum. The curriculum ties "spirituality" with social studies courses. It requires in both public and private schools that students from kindergarten through sixth grade receive 220 minutes of religious instruction and chapel every week, but school exit exams do not have a section on religion. Catholic holy days are routinely observed as school holidays. The constitution prohibits any educational institution from compelling a child to receive religious instruction or attend any religious ceremony or observance without the child's consent or, if under the age of eighteen, the consent of the child's parents. This constitutional safeguard is particularly important because most of the country's primary and elementary schools, high schools, and colleges are church-affiliated. There are occasional instances where administrators either do not know the law or misapply it. These are usually corrected through parent-school consultations. In rare cases, the Ministry of Education intervenes to correct the situation.

The constitution also stipulates that no one shall be required to receive religious instruction or attend services without his or her consent while serving in the armed forces, or while being detained in prison or in any correctional institution. The 850-member Defense Force supported one Catholic chaplain but did not restrict the practice of other religions.

Although the Government has oversight authority over the country's single prison, the institution was managed, and largely financed, by the Kolbe Foundation, a nondenominational Christian nongovernmental organization. Missionaries were active in daily programs at the prison, and at least one lived within the prison compound. Religious conversion was in no way mandatory, but it was part of the primary focus of the prisoner rehabilitation program. Prisoners of any faith could request and receive visits from ministers of their choice.

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. Religious groups occasionally joined forces in ecumenical efforts to distribute goods to the needy, clean up neighborhoods, alert the public to the dangers of promiscuity, fight crime, protect children, and carry out similar endeavors. The Government also occasionally sought input from a cross-section of the religious community in addressing these problems.

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. U.S. embassy representatives also discussed religious freedom with leaders of various religious groups.

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