



Belize

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

October 26, 2009

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom 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 of 322,000. There is 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) includes Europeans, East Indians, Chinese, Arabs, and North Americans.

According to the 2000 census, Roman Catholics constitute 49.6 percent of the population; Pentecostals 7.4 percent; Anglicans 5.3 percent; Seventh-day Adventists 5.2 percent; Mennonites 4.1 percent; Baptists and Methodists 3.5 percent each; and Nazarenes 2.6 percent. 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 are also present. Catholics are numerous throughout the country and constitute the majority in all but two of the country's six districts, Belize and Cayo, where they are still the largest single religious group. Mennonites and Pentecostals live mostly in the rural areas of the Cayo and Orange Walk districts; members of other groups tend to be concentrated in Belize City.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

There is no state religion; however, the preamble to the Constitution states, "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 12 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 Government observes Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Monday, and Christmas as national holidays.

There are no special registration requirements or fees for religious organizations, and legal incorporation for a religious group 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 "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. The law provides for students in both public and church-run schools from kindergarten through sixth grade to receive one class period per week of religious instruction; however, some schools offer religion classes daily. The Constitution prohibits any educational institution from compelling a child to receive religious instruction or attend any religious ceremony or observance, and parents may object to and students may abstain from attending religious observances. This constitutional safeguard is particularly important because most 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. Catholic holy days are routinely observed as school holidays.

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. The Defense Force retained a Christian 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 non-denominational Christian non-governmental organization. Missionaries were active in daily programs at the prison, and a chaplain was present on a daily basis. Religious conversion was in no way mandatory, but religious education was part of the primary focus of the prisoner rehabilitation program. After submitting a written request, a prisoner could receive visits from a representative of the religious group of his choice.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners 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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The Government occasionally sought the opinions of a cross section of the religious community in addressing societal problems.

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