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## Belize

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2010**

**November 17, 2010**

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 333,000. 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. In these two districts, they remain 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." An 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, Salvation Army, Chinese Christian Mission, Chinese Christian Church, 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. 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." Discrimination on religious grounds is illegal.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Monday, and Christmas.

Religious organizations and groups are required to register with the Belize Companies Registry after paying a prescribed fee. 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 nondenominational Christian nongovernmental organization. During the reporting period, two Catholic missionaries actively taught juveniles at the prison. A full-time chaplain is present daily and is responsible for coordinating religious instruction. Religious conversion was in no way mandatory, but it is a primary focus of the prisoner rehabilitation program. Other pastors visit occasionally to hold services. Furthermore, a prisoner could receive visits from a representative of the religious group of his choice after submitting a written request.

### 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 prisoners or detainees in the country.

### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

### 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.

Representatives of various faith-based organizations engaged with law enforcement officials with regards to combating violence through social justice programs.

The Catholic-based Faith and Justice Commission promotes social justice issues. On March 3, 2010, in Belize City the commission held a rally against violence. The commission also hosted prayer services for families of victims of violence. On March 5, 2010, Seventh-day Adventists closed their 25 primary, secondary, and tertiary schools for the day to protest the increasing violence.

The Council for Churches is a loose association of religious denominations representing 75 percent of the Christian community in the country. It is represented on the National Committee for Families and Children and on the National AIDS Commission. These governmental institutions represent multisectoral collaboration between relevant governmental and nongovernmental organizations and are responsible for coordinating and overseeing the national response to issues concerning children and people living with or affected by human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

### 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, trafficking in persons, and the status of conflict resolution programs with leaders of various religious groups.

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