

BELIZE 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

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

U.S. embassy officers spoke regularly with government officials and other groups on issues affecting religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The 2012 official labor force survey reports the population is approximately 338,900. According to the 2010 census, the Roman Catholic Church is the largest religious group, accounting for 40 percent of the population. Pentecostals constitute 9 percent of the population, Seventh-day Adventists 6 percent, Anglicans 5 percent, Mennonites 4 percent, Baptists 4 percent, Methodists 3 percent, members of the Church of the Nazarene 3 percent, and Jehovah's Witnesses 2 percent. Smaller religious groups include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Rastafarians, the Salvation Army, and Bahais. Fifteen percent do not belong to any religious group.

No religious group is a majority in any of the country's six districts. Catholics are found throughout the country. Mennonites and Pentecostals live mostly in the rural areas of the Cayo and Orange Walk districts, and members of other religious groups tend to be concentrated in Belize City.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

There is no state religion, but the preamble to the constitution acknowledges "the supremacy of God." The governor general appoints one of the 13 members of the

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Senate in accordance with the advice of the Council of Churches and the Evangelical Association of Churches. The membership of these organizations includes the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches, the Salvation Army, the Chinese Christian Mission, the Chinese Christian Church, and the Seventh-day Adventists.

Under the constitution, freedom of religion is part of broader protections for freedom of conscience. The constitution provides that no one can be compelled to take an oath contrary to one's religion or belief. The constitution reserves the government's right 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." An unenforced law limits speech that is "blasphemous or indecent." Discrimination on religious grounds is illegal.

Religious groups must register with the official Companies Registry after paying a fee. Property taxes are not levied against churches and other places of worship, but other church-owned buildings occupied on a regular basis, such as the pastor's or priest's residence, are not exempt.

Foreign religious workers may enter the country and proselytize, but they must register and purchase a religious worker's permit for a modest annual fee.

The constitution stipulates that religious groups may establish "places of education" and states that "no such community shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for persons of that community."

By law, the educational system maintains a strong religious curriculum. The curriculum ties "spirituality" to social studies courses. Students in both public and church-run schools from kindergarten through sixth grade must receive one class period per week of religious instruction, and some schools offer religion classes daily. Most primary and elementary schools, high schools, and colleges are church-affiliated. 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.

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

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forces or while detained in prison. The defense force retains a Christian chaplain but does not restrict the practice of other religions.

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

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The country maintained a single central prison owned by the government and managed by the Kolbe Foundation, a Christian nongovernmental organization (NGO). A chaplain and missionary were responsible for coordinating religious instruction. There were also nonreligious educators who provided instruction and training in vocational carpentry, agriculture, counseling, and rehabilitation. Religious conversion was not mandatory, but religion itself functioned as a basis of the prisoner rehabilitation program. Pastors from varying denominations occasionally visited the prison to hold services.

The public school curriculum included mandatory religious instruction. Most courses covered Christian religious history and traditions. There was no system in place to allow students to opt out of the religious elements of the curriculum, although students could abstain from attending religious observances if their parents objected. Instances where administrators did not know the law or misapplied it were usually remedied through parent-school consultations. In rare cases, the Ministry of Education intervened to correct a situation.

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, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Representatives of religious groups engaged with law enforcement officials to combat violence through social justice programs. The Catholic-based Faith and Justice Commission promoted social justice issues. The Council for Churches, representing 75 percent of the Christian community, participated in the National Committee for Families and Children and the National AIDS Commission. Both institutions collaborated with government and NGOs to coordinate and oversee the

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national response to issues concerning children and people living with or affected by HIV or AIDS.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives, including the ambassador, spoke regularly with the government and other groups about religious diversity and other issues affecting religious freedom.