

TIMOR-LESTE 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship, and of religious instruction. Religious organizations may register with the government under the regulations provided for nonprofit corporate bodies. A Seventh-day Adventist student had to relocate to a school in Dili after being expelled from a public school in Lautem for absenteeism on Saturdays during the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Sabbath. Religious groups continued to report incidents in which civil servants rejected marriage or birth certificates issued by religious organizations other than the Catholic Church. Per the concordat with the Holy See, the government allocated annual funds to Catholic dioceses. Non-Catholic groups reported tensions regarding unequal funding or refusal of funding.

Religious minority leaders continued to report threats and damage to their property by community members, at times by members of other religious groups.

The U.S. embassy engaged regularly with government officials on religious freedom. The embassy sponsored one participant in an academic exchange program on religious pluralism hosted by a U.S. university. Following the program, the participant submitted a proposal to establish an Office of Religious Affairs to manage relations between the government and religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2015 census, 97.6 percent of the population is Catholic, 1.96 percent Protestant, and less than 1 percent Muslim. Protestant denominations include the Assemblies of God, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Christian Vision Church. There are also several small nondenominational Protestant congregations. Many citizens also retain animistic beliefs and practices along with their monotheistic religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship and specifies “religious denominations are separated from the State.” It also prohibits discrimination on the basis of religious beliefs and guarantees both the right to conscientious objection and freedom to teach any religion. The constitution protects freedom of religion in the event of a declaration of a state of siege or state of emergency.

There is no official state religion; however, the constitution commends the Catholic Church for its participation in the country’s liberation efforts. The 2015 concordat between the government and the Holy See establishes a legal framework for cooperation, grants the Catholic Church autonomy in establishing and running schools, provides tax benefits, safeguards the Church’s historical and cultural heritage, and acknowledges the right of its foreign missionaries to serve in the country.

Religious organizations may register as nonprofit corporate bodies through the Ministry of Justice’s National Directorate for Registry and Notary Services (DNRN) by submitting articles of association and other relevant documentation, but are not required to do so. The law requires a separate registration with the Ministry of Interior for associations with primarily foreign members, including religious organizations, which must submit their articles of incorporation, proof they have the means to carry out their activities, and the name of a designated representative. In order to receive a tax identification number, organizations must register first with the Ministry of Justice and then bring that registration to the Service for Registration and Verification of Businesses, the business registration agency. DNRN then issues a certificate and legally charters the organization.

The Ministry of Education defines religious study as an optional elective subject in public schools. Most schools in the country are public although the Catholic Church does operate its own private schools.

The law states “foreigners cannot provide religious assistance to the defense and security forces, except in cases of absolute need and urgency.” Foreign citizen missionaries and other religious figures are exempt from paying normal residence and visa fees.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Similar to reports from previous years, one Seventh-day Adventist student was expelled in Lautem Municipality for absenteeism as a result of his observance of the Sabbath on Saturday, when public schools are in session. As with several similar cases, the Seventh-day Adventist Church brought the student into Dili and enrolled him in a school that provided more flexibility for his observance of the Sabbath.

Religious leaders reported ongoing incidents of individual public servants refusing service to religious minority members. A Pentecostal group reported individual notaries had refused to accept members' marriage certificates, but the notarial office director reversed the refusals and ensured that marriage certificates from religious minorities were accepted.

Religious minority leaders reported the government continued to reject marriage and birth certificates from religious organizations other than the Catholic Church as supporting documentation for registering for schools and other official acts. Registrations of births and marriages with the government continued to be an option, but civil registration rates remained relatively low, although increasing, in comparison with those of religious certificates. Civil registration later in life was an option and required only a reference from the head of the local community.

The government provided an annual budget allocation of \$2 million each to the three Catholic dioceses. A Catholic spokesperson said the government's yearly budget also provided an additional \$9 million for church construction. The allocations were governed by the terms of the concordat with the Holy See. The direct budget allocations to the Catholic Church caused some tension with non-Catholic religious organizations, according to religious leaders. All religious organizations could apply, along with other organizations, for the \$9 million in government funding set aside for civil society organizations during the year. The president of the Muslim community reported submitting proposals for funding support, but none received approval. The Protestant Church of Timor-Leste received \$10,000 in funding to support their General Assembly.

At least one member of parliament accused Jehovah's Witnesses of using money to buy people's faith and suggested the government needed to adopt a law to regulate new religions. The prime minister rejected this suggestion and underlined the country's respect for religious freedom.

Police cadets receive training in equal enforcement of the law and preventing discrimination, including discrimination based on religion.

An interreligious forum previously coordinated by the government did not meet during the year. A Catholic priest proposed its revival and institutionalization.

Several Catholic holidays were also national holidays, and Catholic religious leaders regularly presided over government ceremonies.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Catholic Church remained the most influential religious organization in society. Leaders of the Catholic Church and longstanding Protestant and Muslim communities reported good cooperation and relationships among religious groups, but said some of the more recently arrived religious groups did not enjoy the same strong interfaith relations.

Religious minority groups operating in rural areas reported community members made physical threats against their churches. The Seventh-day Adventists said their church in Lautem was a regular target of rock throwing by community members. In February an initial hearing was held in the Ermera district court on a case related to the partial destruction in 2015 of a building being constructed by a Protestant group, reportedly at the instigation of a Catholic priest.

Many religious organizations, both majority and minority, received significant funding from foreign donors.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy underlined the importance of respecting religious freedom in many interactions, including with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, the national police, and the Ministry of Justice.

In August embassy representatives met with participants in a conference on religious freedom in Southeast Asia in Dili and reiterated U.S. support for freedom of religion. The embassy sponsored one participant, a Catholic priest, in an academic exchange program on religious pluralism hosted by a U.S. university in June and July. Following the program, the priest submitted a proposal to the government to establish an Office of Religious Affairs to monitor government funding of religious organizations and to manage relations between the government and religious groups.