

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religious belief and practice, including worship. It prohibits discrimination based on religion. Laws prohibit actions that incite religious hatred and violence. Religious groups said the government provided less financial support for religious ceremonies than in previous years and they were invited to officiate at fewer government ceremonies. The government said the reason for the decrease in funding for religious groups was a decrease in the national budget. The government's national security policy continued to limit the number of long-term foreign missionaries to 35 per registered religious group at any given time.

There were public calls to adopt legislation to outlaw child marriage, but some religious groups, including some Hindus and Muslims, said the legislation would infringe on their religious rights.

The U.S. embassy conducted outreach to religious groups, including Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Orisha, and others as part of its overall efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy representatives met with religious leaders and delivered remarks at a number of events highlighting the importance of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.2 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 26.5 percent of the population is Protestant, including 12 percent Pentecostal or evangelical, 5.7 percent Anglican, 4.1 percent Seventh-day Adventist, 2.5 percent Presbyterian or Congregational, 1.2 percent Baptist, 0.7 percent Methodist, and 0.3 percent Moravian. An additional 21.6 percent is Roman Catholic, 18.2 percent Hindu, 5 percent Muslim, and 1.5 percent Jehovah's Witnesses. Traditional Caribbean religious groups with African roots include the Spiritual Baptists who represent 5.7 percent of the population, and the Orisha, who incorporate elements of West African spiritualism and Christianity, at 0.9 percent. According to the census, 2.2 percent of the population has no religious affiliation, 11.1 percent does not state a religious affiliation, and 7.5 percent lists their affiliation as "other," which includes a number of small Christian groups, Bahais, Rastafarians, Buddhists, and Jews.

The ethnic and religious composition of the two islands varies distinctly. On Trinidad, which makes up 95 percent of the country's population, those of African descent make up 32 percent of the population and are predominantly Christian, with a small Muslim community concentrated in and around Port of Spain, along the east-west corridor of northern Trinidad, and in certain areas of central and south Trinidad. Those of East Indian descent comprise 37 percent of the population, roughly half of whom are Hindu, in addition to some Muslims, Presbyterians, and Catholics. The population of Tobago is 85 percent African descent and predominantly Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religious belief and observance, including worship. It recognizes the existence of basic fundamental human rights and freedoms and prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The law prohibits acts of sedition and seditious intent, which includes engendering or promoting feelings of ill will towards, hostility to, or contempt for any class of inhabitants, including on the basis of religion.

A fine of up to 1,000 Trinidad and Tobago dollars (TT) (\$149) may be levied for expressions of hatred directed specifically against a person's religion, including any "riotous, violent, indecent, or disorderly behavior in any place of divine worship," or attacks, ridicule, or vilification of another person's religion in a manner likely to provoke a breach of the peace. An anti-blasphemy law is not enforced.

Judicial review is available to those who claim to be victims of religious discrimination.

To receive tax-exempt donations or gifts of land, perform marriages, or receive visas for foreign missionaries, religious groups must register with the government. To register, groups must demonstrate they are nonprofit organizations, be in operation for at least one year, and submit a request for charitable status to the Ministry of Finance and the Economy. The request must include a certificate or articles of incorporation, the constitution and bylaws of the organization, and the

most recently audited financial statements. Religious groups have the same rights and obligations as most legal entities, regardless of their registration status. They may, for example, own land and hire employees, and are likewise liable for property taxes and government-mandated employee benefits.

The government permits religious instruction in public schools, allocating time each week during which any religious group with an adherent in the school may provide an instructor at the parents' request. Attendance at these classes is voluntary, and the religious groups represented are diverse. The law states no persons shall be refused admission to any public school on account of their religious beliefs, and no child shall be required to attend any religious observance or receive instruction in religious subjects as a condition of admission or continued attendance in a public school. While parents may enroll their children in religiously affiliated private schools as an alternative to public education, the law does not permit homeschooling. Private schools, also called "assisted schools," receive some government funding for their facilities, but are also privately supported.

The government subsidizes religiously affiliated public schools, including schools operated by Christian, Hindu, and Muslim groups. Primary school funding is allotted on a per-pupil basis, with the amount varying each year. Secondary school funding is allotted to schools based on budget requests submitted by each school.

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Separate legislation governs marriages for each principal religious group, with ceremonies conducted only by that faith's religious leaders. There is a separate law for nonreligious marriage. Hindu females may marry at age 14 and males at 18; Muslim females may marry at age 12 and males at 16; and for followers of the Orisha faith, females may marry at age 16 and males at 18. Nonreligious marriage requires both males and females to be 18 years old.

Foreign missionaries must meet standard requirements for entry visas and must represent a registered religious group. Permits are valid for a maximum period of three years, at a cost of TT 500 (\$75) per year. Missionaries may not remain longer than three years per visit, but may re-enter after a year's absence.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It reserves the right to “impose lawful and reasonable restrictions” with regards to article 21 of the covenant, which provides for right of assembly.

Government Practices

The government financially supported activities of the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), an interfaith coordinating committee representing the major religious groups. Leaders from five faiths (Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Orisha, and Bahai) delivered the invocations at government-sponsored events, including the opening of parliament and the annual court term. According to the IRO president, the government did not maintain its previous levels of engagement and financing of religious organizations during the year. The IRO reported it was invited to officiate at fewer national events than in previous years. The government said the reason for the decrease in support for religious groups was a decrease in grant funding in the national budget.

Members of the government often participated in ceremonies and holidays of various religious groups, regularly emphasizing religious tolerance and harmony. Elected officials from both political parties routinely spoke publicly against religious intolerance. Prime Minister Keith Rowley issued public messages for Easter, Ramadan, and Diwali, underscoring religious freedom and diversity. In his Ramadan message, he said “Islam teaches that all Muslims are brothers regardless of race, tribe, color, or economic background; so too regardless of our origins we are all citizens of this space we call Trinidad and Tobago and we must continue to do all in our power to make our country safe, secure, successful, and prosperous.”

The government continued to limit the number of long-term foreign missionaries to 35 missionaries per registered religious group. Missionaries in excess of the 35 could only stay in the country a maximum of 30 days. IRO members stated the law was applied equally, although some international religious groups or denominations reportedly maintained more than 35 missionaries in the country if they were affiliated with more than one registered group, including nonprofit groups and charities. The IRO’s chairman said the law constrained Hindus, who have few missionaries, but would like them to stay longer than the three-year limit under law. He said that other groups, such as the Mormons, consistently operated at their 35-missionary cap.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious organizations debated child marriage and its relation to religious freedom. The Hindu Women's Organization of Trinidad and Tobago, the National Muslim Women's Organization of Trinidad and Tobago, and other NGOs made public calls to pass legislation to outlaw child marriage. Other religious organizations said such legislation would infringe on their religious rights. Prominent Hindu leaders stated a change in the law would be an infringement on their constitutionally protected religious rights and suggested the country would also have to change the lyrics to the national anthem (which say that "here every creed and race find an equal place") if child marriage were to be outlawed. Official statistics from the Office of the Registrar General showed an increase in child marriages over the past two decades, with 548 certified marriages of children between the ages of 12 and 16 occurring during a 10-year period from 2006 to 2016.

The honorary Consul for Israel reported instances of anti-Semitic statements on local Islamic Facebook groups. For instance, following several international instances of political violence, individuals accused members of the "Zionist's" news media of a conspiracy to blame mass murder on Muslims.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The embassy hosted an iftar during which the Ambassador, and the president of the Anjuman Sunnat ul Jamaat Association, the largest Muslim association, delivered remarks highlighting the value of religious freedom and the country's role as an example of religious diversity and tolerance. The Ambassador gave remarks at Eid al-Fitr celebrations in Tobago, advocated religious tolerance and cooperation, and spoke out against extremism. The Ambassador's statement and attendance received nationwide media coverage.

In September the embassy hosted a roundtable to discuss interfaith cooperation and religious tolerance between representatives of groups that were members and nonmembers of the IRO, which included attendance by Presbyterians, Muslims, Hindus, and Orisha Baptists. The roundtable also included a discussion of the religious community's role in promoting human rights in the country.

Embassy staff met regularly with Muslim religious and civil society leaders for discussions including on topics such as religious understanding and acceptance. In

June eight representatives from various Muslim organizations took part in a U.S. government exchange program for religious leaders focused on countering violent extremism. Embassy staff also continued working with religious groups, such as the Anjuman Sunnat ul Jamaat Association, and delivered remarks on religious freedom at conventions of the Trinidad Muslim League and the Ahmadi Muslim Community.