

PANAMA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution, laws, and decrees provide for freedom of religion and worship, and prohibit discrimination based on religion. The constitution recognizes Catholicism as the religion of the majority of citizens but not as the state religion. Public schools are required to teach Catholicism but parents have the option of exempting their children from religion classes. The government generally turned to Catholic clergy to conduct religious invocations. Some non-Catholic groups said the government provided preferential distribution of subsidies to Catholic-run private schools for salaries and operating expenses.

Muslims and Rastafarians reported some discrimination in employment. Some Muslims stated they failed to receive job offers when interviewers, particularly evangelical Protestants, assessed them based on their dress and appearance rather than their job qualifications.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met several times with Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Episcopalian, Lutheran, and evangelical Protestant leaders to discuss issues related to religious freedom, including societal perceptions and treatment of members of religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.7 million (July 2016 estimate). The Ministry of Health estimates 69.7 percent of the population is Catholic and 18 percent evangelical Protestant. Episcopalian and Methodist bishops state their communities have 11,000 and 1,500 members, respectively, and the Lutheran Church states there are 1,000 Lutherans. Smaller religious groups, found primarily in Panama City or other larger urban areas, include Seventh-day Adventists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Buddhists, Bahais, Pentecostals, and Rastafarians. Baptists and Methodists derive their membership in large part from the African Antillean and expatriate communities.

Jewish leaders estimate their community at approximately 15,000 members, centered largely in Panama City. The Muslim community, largely comprised of Arab- and Pakistani-origin individuals, numbers approximately 14,000 and is centered primarily in Panama City, Colon City, and Penonome. There are

approximately 850 Rastafarians, most of who live in Colon City and La Chorrera, Panama Oeste. Indigenous religious groups, including Ibeorgun (prevalent among the Guna community), Mama Tata and Mama Chi (prevalent among the Ngobe Bugle community), and Embera (prevalent among the Embera community), are found in their respective indigenous communities located throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious practices and provides for freedom of religion and worship, provided that “Christian morality and public order” are respected. It recognizes Catholicism as the religion of the majority of citizens but does not designate it as the state religion. It limits the public offices religious ministers and members of religious orders may hold to those related to social assistance, education, and scientific research. It forbids the formation of political parties based on religion. The constitution prohibits discrimination toward public servants based on their religious practices or beliefs.

The constitution grants legal status to religious associations so they may manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law. To register, the group must submit to the Ministry of Government (MOG) a power of attorney, charter, names of the board members (if applicable), copy of the internal bylaws (if applicable), and payment of four balboas (\$4) for processing. Once the MOG approves the registration, the religious association must then register the MOG’s resolution in the Public Registry. Registered religious associations must apply to the Directorate of Internal Revenue of the Ministry of Economy and Finance in order to receive clearance for duty-free imports. The government may donate government properties to registered religious associations, upon approval by the Legislative Tax Committee and the cabinet. The law states income from religious activities is tax exempt as long as it is collected through such activities as church and burial services and charitable events.

The constitution requires public schools to provide instruction on Catholic teachings. Parents have the right to exempt their children from religious education. The constitution allows for the establishment of private religious schools.

Immigration law grants foreign religious workers temporary missionary worker visas that must be renewed every two years, for up to a total of six years. Catholic and Orthodox Christian priests and nuns are exempt from the renewal requirement

and are issued a six-year visa. Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim clergy and other religious workers are also eligible for the special, automatic six-year visa, but must submit extra legal documents with their applications. These additional requirements include a copy of the organization's bylaws, the MOG-issued registration certificate, and a letter from the organization's leader in the country certifying the religious worker will be employed at its place of worship. The application fee is 250 balboas (\$250) for all religious denominations.

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

Government Practices

According to a Rastafarian leader, the government did not consider Rastafarians a religious organization as the community had chosen not to participate in the registration process. The Ministry of Government previously issued the Rastafarian Alliance of Panama a permit to function as an NGO.

The government continued to rely primarily on Catholic clergy to conduct religious invocations at government events. Many official celebrations included participation of the highest-ranking officials at Catholic masses. During the June Panama Canal expansion ceremony, leaders from five different religious groups delivered invocations. Catholic and Episcopal priests delivered an ecumenical religious invocation at a ceremony marking the conclusion of national judicial reforms. Muslims and Jews continued to serve in the cabinet of President Juan Carlos Varela.

Muslim women, Catholic nuns, and Rastafarians were required to pull back their head covering to show their ears in pictures taken by immigration officials upon their arrival in the country. Civil registry and customs authorities, however, agreed to take the photographs and carry out the searches in private if Rastafarians so requested.

Some non-Catholic religious leaders expressed concern the government gave preferential treatment to Catholic schools when allocating subsidies for salaries and operational expenses for religious schools. According to the Ministry of Education, 24 private schools were allocated approximately 325,000 balboas (\$325,000) in subsidies in 2015 and 2016, including Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Episcopalian schools; the ministry did not provide a proportional breakdown among the religious groups.

The government awarded 12.1 million balboas (\$12.1 million) to restore five Catholic Churches and the National Theater located in the San Felipe district, a UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage-designated area. The government also awarded the Evangelical Church of Arraijan approximately 30,000 balboas (\$30,000 dollars) to produce religious music.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some Muslims stated they failed to receive employment offers when job interviewers, particularly evangelical Protestant interviewers, assessed them based on their dress and appearance rather than their qualifications.

The Inter-Religious Committee of Panama, an interfaith committee made up of representatives of the Catholic, Episcopal, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Methodist, evangelical Protestant, and Lutheran churches, the Salvation Army, the Colon Islamic Congregation, and the Kol Shearith Jewish Congregation, met several times during the year and held several joint public events. The committee provided a coordination mechanism for interfaith activities and promoted mutual respect and appreciation among the various religious groups.

In September members of the Kol Shearith Jewish congregation, the Colon Muslim congregation, the Episcopal, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Ngabe Mama Tata communities held an interfaith event to celebrate the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, a joint initiative of Pope Francis and Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew. Government representatives from the Ministry of the Environment, the Aquatic Resources Authority of Panama, and the Panama City mayor's office attended.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with religious leaders, members of religious groups, and community organizations to discuss issues related to religious freedom, including societal perceptions and the treatment of members of religious groups. The Ambassador and embassy staff members met several times with the principal leaders of the country's largest religious groups, including Catholic Archbishop Jose Domingo Ulloa, Jewish Kol Shearith Congregation President Moises Abadi and Rabbi Gustavo Kraselnik of the congregation, Episcopal Bishop Julio Murray, and Colon Islamic leader Luis Ibrahim, among others. In September the Ambassador hosted nine religious leaders for a roundtable discussion on freedom of religion. The group shared respect and

tolerance principles that united them as members of society; they also spoke about their joint religious activities. During the year, embassy officers met with Muslim leaders and leaders of religious organizations assisting migrants at the Paso Canoas border.