

PANAMA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution, laws, and decrees provide for freedom of religion and worship, prohibit discrimination based on religion, and allow religious organizations to register as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which allows them to receive tax benefits. Some non-Catholic groups said they were concerned that Roman Catholic organizations tended to receive preferential treatment, particularly in religious school subsidies.

Rastafarians, who are not legally recognized as a religious organization, and the African Panamanian Muslim community reported societal discrimination because of their appearance. Rastafarians reported authorities denied one of their members entry into a bank. The government subsequently penalized that institution for applying old “right of admittance” practices now forbidden by law.

U.S. embassy representatives met with the government to discuss issues related to subsidies for religious schools. The Ambassador and other embassy officials met several times 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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.6 million (July 2014 estimate). The government does not collect statistics on religious affiliation, and estimates from religious leaders and nongovernmental organizations vary. Approximately 75 to 85 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 15 to 25 percent is evangelical Christian. Smaller religious groups are found primarily in Panama City or other larger urban areas. These include Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Hindus, Buddhists, Bahais, and Rastafarians. There are also groups of evangelicals and Mormons in small towns. Baptists, Methodists, and Lutherans derive their membership in large part from the African Antillean and expatriate communities.

The Jewish and Muslim communities have approximately 14,000 members each. The Jewish community is centered largely in Panama City. Muslims live primarily in Panama City, Colon City, and Penonome. There are approximately 700 Rastafarians, most of who live in La Chorrera, in the province of Panama Oeste.

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Indigenous religious groups include Ibeorgun (among Kuna), Mamatata and Mamachi (among Ngobe Bugle), and Embera (among Embera), found in their respective indigenous communities 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 official state religion. It limits the public offices religious leaders may hold to those related to social assistance, education, and scientific research, and forbids the formation of political parties based on religion.

The constitution grants legal status to religious associations so they may manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law, the same status granted other “juridical persons” or NGOs. Executive decrees empower the Ministry of Government to grant “juridical personality,” which allows a religious group to apply for all tax benefits available to nonprofit organizations. Although registration is not required, registered religious groups may receive tax-free donations and other benefits. To register, the group must submit a power of attorney, charter, names of the board members (if applicable), copy of the internal bylaws (if applicable), and payment of \$4 in fiscal duty stamps. Once the ministry approves the registration, the religious association must ensure that the resolution is included in the Public Registry.

The law states that income from religious activities is tax exempt as long as it is collected via, *inter alia*, church and burial services and charitable events. It affirms that items imported by religious associations for religious activities will be duty free, including vehicles, training materials and religious supplies. Upon approval by the Legislative Tax Committee and the Cabinet, the government can donate government properties to registered religious associations.

Immigration law grants most foreign religious workers temporary missionary worker visas that must be renewed every two years, up to six years’ total. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Catholic priests and nuns are eligible for a special, automatic six-year visa. Protestant ministers, pastors, Jewish rabbis, Muslim

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imams, 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 Ministry of Government-issued registration certificate, and a letter from the organization's leader in Panama certifying that the religious worker will be employed at its place of worship. The application fee is \$250 for all religious denominations.

The constitution requires teaching of Catholicism in public schools; however, parents have the right to exempt their children from religious instruction. The constitution allows for the establishment of private schools. It prohibits discrimination toward public servants based on their religious practices or beliefs.

Government Practices

Muslim leaders reported that officials sometimes told Muslim women wearing hijabs to remove them when taking photos for official documents such as identification cards or passports. Once the women or members of their mosques reminded officials of religious freedom rules, however, they were permitted to wear the head coverings as long as their faces and ears were visible. Immigration officers said they asked Muslim women and Catholic nuns to show their faces and ears for official pictures, but allowed them to cover their hair.

Some non-Catholic religious groups said they perceived that Roman Catholicism maintained certain state-sanctioned advantages over other faiths, such as the use only of Roman Catholic clergy to conduct religious invocations at some government events. Many official celebrations included participation of the highest-ranking officials at Catholic Mass.

Non-Catholic religious leaders expressed concern that the government gave preferential treatment to Catholic schools when allocating subsidies for religious schools. According to the Ministry of Education, of the 23 schools that received subsidies during the year, 13 were Catholic. Roman Catholic Bishop Julio Murray met with the new minister of education during the year to request a reconsideration of an application for a fixed annual subsidy of \$40,000 for the Christ's Episcopal School in Colon. The government gave the school only \$25,000 in 2013. The minister decision on the subsidy request for the school was pending at year's end.

According to a Rastafarian leader, the government did not consider Rastafarians a religious organization. The Rastafarian Alliance of Panama had a permit issued by

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the Ministry of Government as a NGO, but it did not own a site to congregate and members met in private places for their annual Nyabinghi celebration.

Rastafarians were required to remove their “tam hats” when they applied for an identification card or passport and when they went through security screenings at airports. Civil registry and customs authorities, however, agreed to take the photographs and carry out the searches in private if the Rastafarians so requested. Rastafarian leaders reported that arbitrary strip searches by police agents decreased significantly over the last decade since the international Rastafarian leadership decided to improve the group’s image by wearing tam hats and refraining from smoking cannabis in public. They said this decline was part of a broader trend of increased societal acceptance.

The United Methodist Church maintained a bilateral agreement with the Ministry of Health to conduct social work. Church leaders reported they had three foreign missionaries, all of whom were able to obtain religious worker visas.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Both the Rastafarian and the African Panamanian Muslim communities reported societal discrimination toward their members due to their appearance. They stated potential employers tended to discriminate, especially if the interviewers were evangelicals.

In July Camilo Barnett, a Rastafarian, was denied access to Banco Universal, a local private bank, because of his tam hat, despite passing the bank’s security screening and receiving a call from the bank asking him to pick up a check. The bank officer who had initially called Barnett also refused him entry but offered to transfer the money to another bank’s account. Barnett subsequently filed a complaint with the local authorities, who fined the bank \$1,000 (the maximum penalty) for applying old “right of admittance” practices now forbidden by law.

The African Panamanian Muslim community stated it enjoyed a good relationship with the Panamanian Arab Muslim community. African Panamanian Muslim leaders reported, however, that linguistic, cultural, and ethnic differences between the African Panamanian and Pakistani immigrant communities made it difficult for them to interact, despite sharing the same faith. According to one leader, Pakistanis reacted negatively to African Panamanian Muslim women when they went into the mosque on Avenida Mexico in Panama City, although no one denied them access.

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The Ecumenical Committee of Panama, an interfaith committee made up of representatives of the Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Methodist, Evangelical, and Lutheran Churches, the Salvation Army, the Colon Islamic Congregation (Arab), and the Kol Shearith Reform Jewish Congregation, held two “Praying Journeys” in September and October. These events provided a coordination mechanism for interfaith activities and promoted mutual respect and appreciation among the various religious groups. The Panama City Muslim congregation (mainly from India and Pakistan) and the Orthodox Jewish Shevet Ahim and Beth El congregations did not join the committee, despite invitations.

On October 2, Roman Catholic Archbishop Jose D. Ulloa, Reform Jewish Rabbi Gustavo Kraselnik, Episcopal Bishop Julio Murray, Muslim Imam Mohammed Al Sayed, and Evangelical Reverend Rolando Hernandez co-signed a public letter entitled “Jews, Christians and Muslims: United for Peace and Human Dignity” in which they called for a stop to religious killings around the world by “religious extremists.” The letter also asked President Juan Carlos Varela and the National Assembly to maintain Panama’s role as a mediator during international conflicts.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with the Ministry of Education specifically to discuss the perception that Catholic schools receive preferential treatment in the allocation of school subsidies. Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, met regularly with members of religious groups, faith-based organizations, and communities to discuss a wide range of religious freedom issues, including societal perceptions and the treatment of members of religious groups. During the year, the Ambassador met several times with Catholic, Rastafarian, and evangelical leaders to discuss religious freedom. He attended services at a wide range of places of worship and spoke at a B’nai B’rith regional policy forum.