

# TIMOR-LESTE

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom, although there were some ongoing issues with local officials who closed churches in previous years without a clear legal basis.

There were isolated reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and regularly expressed support to government leaders for consolidation of constitutional democracy, including respect for basic human rights such as religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to the 2010 census, 96.8 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 2.2 percent Protestant, and less than 1 percent Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu. Protestant denominations include the Assemblies of God, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Christian Vision Church. There are also a number of small, nondenominational Protestant congregations. Many citizens also retain animistic beliefs and practices, which they do not see as incompatible with their formal religious affiliation.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There is no official state religion, but Catholic values remain prominent in the political life of the country.

The government provides some funding to religious organizations to support activities and help in the construction or rehabilitation of places of worship, usually on the basis of a request for assistance.

Police cadets receive training in equal enforcement of the law and nondiscrimination, including religious nondiscrimination.

Since 2007 the secretary of state for security has had authority to register religious organizations; however, this agency had not yet developed registration procedures by year's end.

A 2003 law on immigration and asylum states that "foreigners cannot provide religious assistance to the defense and security forces, except in cases of absolute need and urgency," but this has not unduly restricted the work of religious missionaries. Missionaries and other religious figures were exempt from paying normal residence and visa fees, although some denominations complained of long delays in the visa approval and renewal processes.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Assumption Day, All Saints' Day, All Souls' Day, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Christmas, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the year.

### **Government Inaction**

There were two ongoing cases in which local district administrators had made decisions to close Protestant missionary churches. Although these decisions did not appear to have a legal basis--and in one case a judge ordered the church reopened--the government had not taken action by year's end to ensure the reopening of the churches. There was also one ongoing court case related to mob violence and government inaction, which occurred in 2010.

In December 2010, a group of agitators demanded the closure of a Protestant missionary church in Oecusse. Following a meeting of stakeholders on January 18, the local district administrator ordered the provisional closure of the

church. The administrator met several times with representatives of the church, but at year's end the provisional order remained in effect.

In March 2009, a Protestant missionary church in Ainaro reported that its three churches were locked illegally to prevent services from being held. United Nations Police (UNPOL) and the National Police of Timor-Leste (PNTL) reportedly spoke with the instigators, who refused to remove the lock and said that the Protestant church should leave. The case was brought before a local court. The judge sent four orders for the churches to be reopened but the PNTL never executed the judge's orders. The local district administrator reportedly sent a letter to the judge stating that he refused to accept the court orders to reopen the churches. The three churches remained locked at year's end.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were several isolated reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Attitudes toward the small Protestant and Muslim communities generally were friendly in the capital of Dili; however, outside of the capital, non-Catholic religious groups sometimes were viewed with suspicion.

In October persons in the village of Balibo, Maliana, attacked a faith healer who described himself as Catholic and fought with his followers. The PNTL and local district administrator intervened to stop the violence, and the two sides separated peacefully.

In June protesters threw stones at the headquarters of a Protestant church in Dili following rumors (later confirmed to be untrue) that missionaries had desecrated a statue of a Catholic saint. The PNTL arrived at the scene to disperse the crowd, which departed peacefully. Based on the same rumors, protesters also threw stones at the houses of Protestant church members in the district of Same and at a Protestant church in Baucau.

In October 2010, a group of local Catholics, including the village chief and lay religious leaders, reportedly burned down three local Protestant leaders' houses in Maliana. The houses, and a store attached to one of the houses, were looted before they were set on fire and money and goods were taken. The attacks occurred when the Protestant leaders were away and only women and children were home. The mob mistreated the women and children before starting the fires. It was reported that the PNTL had knowledge about the attack beforehand but did nothing to

prevent it. UNPOL officers were alerted during the attacks but did nothing to stop them. Official complaints have been filed with the PNTL headquarters in Dili and with the UN human rights division. The case was going through the judicial process at year's end.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and regularly expressed support to government leaders for consolidation of constitutional democracy, including respect for basic human rights such as religious freedom.

The U.S. government encouraged the justice sector to develop institutions to promote the rule of law and ensure respect for religious freedom as provided for in the constitution.