

GUYANA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. embassy officers at all levels met with religious community leaders and participated in more than a dozen events, including televised speaking engagements. Many governmental events at the national level also included religious components from the country's Christian, Hindu, and Muslim communities. Embassy officers also met with members of U.S. religious organizations, including the Hindu diaspora, who are involved in significant community projects within the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2002 census, the population is approximately 751,000. An estimated 57 percent is Christian, 28 percent Hindu, 7 percent Muslim (mainly Sunni), and 2 percent adheres to other religious beliefs. Of Christian groups, 17 percent are Pentecostal, 8 percent Roman Catholic, 7 percent Anglican, 5 percent Seventh-day Adventist, and 20 percent are other or unaffiliated groups. There are small numbers of Rastafarians and Bahais. An estimated 4 percent of the population does not profess any religion. Some religious groups assert greater numbers of members than reported in the 2002 census.

The country is ethnically diverse, reflecting East Indian, African, Chinese, and European ancestry, as well as a sizeable indigenous population. The membership of most religious groups includes a cross section of ethnic groups, although most Hindus are Indo-Guyanese and nearly all Rastafarians are Afro-Guyanese.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The law requires a prison term of one year for a blasphemous libel conviction, but exempts religious expression made in “good faith and decent language” from blasphemous libel convictions. The government does not enforce the law, and there were no prosecutions for blasphemous libel during the year. The law protects the right of individuals to choose and change their religion and to interpret religious beliefs for themselves. Members of all religious groups worship freely. There is no state religion.

While the government recognizes religious groups of all faiths, they must register to receive formal recognition. Religious groups seeking to establish formal operations must first obtain permission from the Ministry of Home Affairs. The government limits the number of representatives of foreign religious groups based on historical trends and on the discretion of the president. Access to Amerindian areas requires the permission of the local village council.

There are both public and private religiously affiliated schools. Parents are free to send their children to the school of their choice.

The Guyana Defense Force (GDF) coordinates with civilian religious groups to provide military personnel with access to religious services. Leaders of all major religious groups conduct prayer services and counseling, although generally only Christian sermons are given on GDF bases.

Many national-level events, such as national day celebrations, included religious representatives from Christian, Hindu, and Muslim groups.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter, Easter Monday, Christmas, Phagwah, Diwali, Youman Nabi (Maulid al-Nabi), and Eid Al-Adha.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with the representatives of major religious groups and attended more than a dozen local religious group-sponsored events. Embassy-sponsored events often included religious leaders.

The embassy advocated for fair and open access for all religious groups seeking to operate in the country. The ambassador hosted a dinner in honor of The Antilles Episcopal Conference Meeting of Caribbean Catholic Bishops in April. The deputy chief of mission attended the March ground-breaking ceremony for the Hindu New Jersey Arya Samaj and Guyana Central Arya Samaj Humanitarian Mission Village, which will provide interfaith accommodation for street children, abused persons, and aged persons without family.

The embassy's interfaith outreach coordinator spoke during a local celebration for Eid Milad-un-Nabi about U.S. policy on religious tolerance and global efforts to engage Muslims. Local television featured the speech. Embassy staff worked with a local Muslim group to build public-private relationships between government officials and private institutions. These events underscored the U.S. commitment to religious freedom, tolerance, and inclusiveness.