

SURINAME 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 staff, including the ambassador, continued to promote understanding among religious groups through outreach efforts to the Muslim, Hindu, and Christian communities. These efforts included official exchange programs, as well as hosting and attending events with religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to a 2011 World Bank estimate, the population is 530,000.

Approximately 41 percent of the population is Christian, of which half are Roman Catholics, according to the 2004 census. A wide range of other groups, including Moravian, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, evangelical Protestant, Baptist, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), make up the remaining Christian population.

Twenty percent of the population is Hindu, including the Sanathan Dharma and the Arya Dewaker. Muslims, including Sunni, Ahmadiyya, and the World Islamic Call Society, make up 13.5 percent. Approximately 3 percent adhere to indigenous religions. Bahais, Jews, Buddhists, Brahma Kumaris, and Hare Krishnas are also present in small numbers. There are three Rastafarian organizations: Aya Bingi Order, 12th Tribe, and Bobo Shanti.

Some Amerindian and Maroon populations adhere to indigenous religions. Some Amerindians, concentrated principally in the interior and to a lesser extent in coastal areas, practice shamanism through a medicine man (piaiman). Many Maroons, who inhabit the interior, worship nature through a practice that has no special name. Other Maroons, as well as some Creoles in urban areas, worship their ancestors through a rite called wintie. Citizens of Amerindian and Maroon origin who identify as Christian often combine Christian practices with indigenous religious customs with the tacit approval of Christian leaders.

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There is a correlation between ethnicity and religion. Many political parties have strong ethnic ties, and members tend to belong to the same religious group. With the exception of those following indigenous practices, religious groups are not concentrated in any particular region.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. A rarely enforced law prohibits blasphemy in various forms and penalizes it with fines and imprisonment.

The constitution permits individuals to choose or change their religion. The constitution categorizes the right to religious freedom as a “personal right and freedom” and states that any violation can be brought before a court of justice. The constitution provides that no individual shall be discriminated against on the grounds of religion. The government does not favor a particular religion, and no tenets of a particular religion are codified in criminal or civil laws.

The government does not require religious groups to register and does not establish requirements for recognition of religious groups.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public schools, although public schools celebrate various religious holidays. Parents may not homeschool children for religious or other reasons; however, they may enroll their children in private schools, many of which have a religious affiliation. Some religious groups manage their own primary and secondary schools, which include religious instruction. Students in public schools are allowed to wear religious symbols.

The government provides limited subsidies to a number of public elementary and secondary schools established and managed by various religious groups. While the teachers are civil service employees and the schools are public, religious groups provide all funding, with the exception of teachers’ salaries and a small maintenance stipend for the schools. Government-subsidized private schools run by religious groups accept students of all ethnicities and religions.

The armed forces maintain a chaplaincy, with Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic clergy available to military personnel of all religious groups. While the

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chaplaincy provides interfaith services, personnel are also welcome to attend outside religious services.

The government currently observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Holi Phagwa, Diwali, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas.

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, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The Inter-Religious Council consisted of representatives of five religious groups: two Hindu groups, two Muslim groups, and the Catholic Church. Council members met monthly to discuss planned interfaith activities and their positions on government policies. The government partially supported and consulted with the council. Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and Rastafarians also each had umbrella organizations bringing together congregations of the same religious group.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials continued to promote understanding among religious groups through consistent outreach efforts to the Muslim, Hindu, and Christian communities. These efforts included periodic outreach events with each community, participation in local religious services and holiday celebrations, and U.S. government-sponsored exchange programs. The ambassador hosted a dinner for the leaders of the Muslim community following Ramadan to strengthen ties with the Muslim community.

The ambassador visited the chairmen of the Original and Modern streams of the Hindu community, the first time the groups received a visit from a U.S. ambassador.