

TIMOR-LESTE 2013 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. There were reports, however, that the government failed to respond adequately and in a timely manner to alleged infringements on religious freedom.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Generally, public attitudes toward the small Protestant and Muslim communities were friendly in the capital of Dili; however, outside of the capital, Protestant religious groups were occasionally subject to harassment, violence, and discrimination.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and regularly expressed support to government leaders for religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.2 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2010 census, 96.8 percent of the population is Catholic, 2.2 percent Protestant, and less than 1 percent Muslim. Protestant denominations include the Assemblies of God, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Christian Vision Church. There are also several small nondenominational Protestant congregations. Many citizens also retain animistic beliefs and practices along with their organized religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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

There is no official state religion.

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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.

The secretary of state for security has authority to register religious organizations; however, the agency has yet to develop registration procedures.

The law states that “foreigners cannot provide religious assistance to the defense and security forces, except in cases of absolute need and urgency.” Foreign citizen missionaries and other religious figures are exempt from paying normal residence and visa fees.

Government Practices

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice but there were reports that it failed to respond adequately and in a timely manner to alleged infringements on religious freedom.

Catholic values remained prominent in the political life of the country.

Some religious minorities viewed the government funding process for religious organizations as discriminatory. The government funded requests from the Catholic Church and the main Dili mosque for new construction and building maintenance, but several Protestant groups stated the government would not fund their project requests. The majority of funds for Protestant church building projects came from foreign donors.

Some denominations complained of long delays in the visa approval and renewal processes. The ban on foreigners providing religious services to defense and security forces has not unduly restricted the work of missionaries.

Government Inaction

Protestant religious leaders said there were cases of physical violence directed against Protestants by local community members, leaders, and officials in rural areas. Although victims occasionally reported these cases, the government had not taken action by year’s end.

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Protestant community leaders reported that in March local teachers and staff of a public secondary school in Lospalos expelled two students because of the students' Protestant religious affiliation. The police and the director for secondary education from the Ministry of Education intervened. Following a meeting with local government officials, the Ministry of Education declared that it fully respected religious freedom, but the ministry failed to ensure the reinstatement of the students. The students decided to change schools, but state and Catholic private schools in Dili refused them because of their religious affiliation. The Islamic school in Dili finally accepted the two students, even though they were not Muslims. Protestant leaders and government officials held several follow-up meetings about the issue, but the expulsions remained in effect.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Generally, public attitudes toward the small Protestant and Muslim communities were friendly in the capital of Dili; however, outside of the capital, Protestant religious groups were occasionally subject to harassment, violence, and discrimination.

A few Protestant churches operating in rural areas reported that their churches and members encountered harassment and physical threats. These tensions sometimes escalated into incidents of physical violence in remote rural communities. Some Protestant leaders reported individuals who converted to a Protestant faith encountered harassment by family, members of their community, and local leaders.

In March and April a Protestant missionary church in the town of Lospalos reported that members of a local Catholic youth group and a community leader harassed its members and prevented them from holding religious services. The national police reportedly investigated the case, but no further action was taken by year's end. The church's leaders were able to resume religious services.

According to Protestant community leaders, in October a member of the local community stoned a Protestant church in Lospalos and physically assaulted one of the church's members. Other members of the local community also threatened church property and church members.

At year's end one pending court case of societal abuse against Jehovah's Witnesses remained in the judicial process.

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Muslim leaders contacted by the embassy reported no discrimination.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government and regularly expressed support to government leaders for religious freedom.

The Ambassador and other embassy representatives encouraged the justice sector to develop institutions to promote the rule of law and ensure respect for religious freedom, and the United States government provided some funding for government training in these areas. In July embassy representatives discussed religious freedom and tolerance issues with senior Muslim leaders. The embassy's ongoing book donations to local schools emphasize a pluralistic society in which diversity is valued, including religious freedom.