

GUYANA 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. Some religious groups, however, reported that government actions interfered with their ability to operate freely.

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 sponsored by local religious groups, including events where embassy representatives spoke about U.S. practices regarding religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 740,000 (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2002 census, 57 percent of the population is Christian, 28 percent Hindu, 7 percent Muslim (mainly Sunni), and 2 percent adheres to other religious groups. Among Christian groups, Pentecostals make up 17 percent of the national population, Roman Catholics 8 percent, Anglicans 7 percent, Seventh-day Adventists 5 percent, Methodists 2 percent, and other Christians 18 percent. There are small numbers of Rastafarians and Bahais. An estimated 4 percent of the population does not profess any religious affiliation. Some religious groups assert greater numbers of members than reported in the 2002 census.

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

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The law protects the right of individuals to choose and change their religion and to interpret religious beliefs for themselves. An unenforced law requires a prison

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term of one year for a blasphemous libel conviction, but exempts religious expression made in “good faith and decent language.” There is no state religion.

All religious groups must register with the government through the deeds registry to receive formal recognition. Once formally recognized, a religious group falls under legislation governing not-for-profit organizations and is able to conduct financial operations, buy property, and receive tax benefits. Foreign religious workers require a visa from the Ministry of Home Affairs. The government limits the number of visas for representatives of foreign religious groups based on historical trends and on the discretion of the president. Religious groups seeking to enter Amerindian villages must first apply for and obtain the permission of the village council.

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

Government Practices

Several ongoing government practices impeded activities of religious groups.

Religious groups stated that they continued to experience adverse effects from a government takeover in 1976 of the administration of more than 600 private schools and hospitals, many of which were run by religious organizations. Religious groups retained title to these properties, but the government required that they be made available for government use as schools and health clinics. Although the government has continued to pay a nominal rent each year, religious groups wishing to terminate government control have been unable to do so. Religious groups stated that in some cases when the government ceased using the properties for health and educational purposes, other government agencies attempted to occupy the properties, but in all reported instances the religious organizations were successful in negotiating with them to leave the premises. In cases where the government returned the properties to religious organizations, some of the properties were in poor condition.

One religious group stated that senior government officials applied pressure on religious groups to refrain from speaking out on social issues, especially in cases in which the government considered the group to be critical of government actions or policies.

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The Guyana Defense Force (GDF) coordinated with civilian religious groups to provide military personnel with access to religious services. Leaders of all major religious groups conducted prayer services and counseling on GDF bases.

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.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy advocated with the government for fair and open access for all religious groups seeking to operate in the country.

Embassy officials met with representatives of major religious groups and attended more than a dozen local religious group-sponsored events, including televised speaking engagements. The embassy encouraged pluralistic religious expression through engaging a variety of local religious organizations. An embassy representative attended the 92nd anniversary of the founding of the Dharm Shala, a Hindu temple, and the Muslim Youth League's You-Man-Nabi Celebration and spoke at both events about the U.S. practices on religious tolerance and the embassy's interest in engaging with religious communities.