

# **GUYANA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including the right to choose and change one's religion. Religious groups stated that they continued to experience adverse effects from a 1976 government takeover of the administration of more than 600 private schools and hospitals, many of which had been run by religious organizations.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Embassy officials met with religious group representatives and hosted events where participants discussed the importance of religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 735,554 (July 2014 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. Most Hindus are Indian Guyanese and nearly all Rastafarians are African Guyanese.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of worship and religion. 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 term of one

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year for a blasphemous libel conviction, but exempts religious expression made in “good faith and decent language.”

All places of worship must be registered with the government through the deeds registry to receive formal recognition. The deeds registry requires an organization to submit a proposed name and address for the place of worship, as well as the names of executive group members or congregation leaders. Once formally recognized, a place of worship falls under legislation governing not-for-profit organizations, which allows the group to conduct financial operations, buy property, and receive tax benefits in its name. Foreign religious workers require a visa from the Ministry of Home Affairs. 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; however, religious education is not compulsory. Most public schools’ religious affiliations are Anglican or Methodist. Parents are free to send their children to the school of their choice.

### **Government Practices**

There were reports the government discouraged religious groups from becoming advocates on social issues, especially in cases in which the government considered the group’s position to be critical of government actions or policies.

The Guyana Defense Force (GDF) coordinated with civilian religious groups to provide military personnel with access to religious services. Leaders of many religious groups conducted prayer services and counseling on GDF bases. Government representatives regularly participated in the observance of Christian, Muslim, and Hindu religious holidays throughout the year.

The government limited the number of visas for foreign representatives of religious groups based on historical trends, the relative size of the group, and the president’s discretion.

Religious groups stated they continued to experience adverse effects from a 1976 government takeover of the administration of more than 600 private schools and hospitals, many of which had been run by religious organizations. Religious groups retained title to these properties, but the government required they be made

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available for government use as schools and health clinics. Although the government continued to pay a nominal rent each year, religious groups wishing to terminate government control were 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.

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

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

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

Embassy officials met with representatives of major religious groups. Embassy representatives attended a number of events hosted by Muslim and Hindu communities during the year, including Eid and Diwali celebrations. The embassy hosted leaders of the Muslim community for an iftar, and participants discussed the importance of religious freedom.