

PANAMA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution, laws, and decrees provide for freedom of religion and worship, and prohibit discrimination based on religion. The constitution recognizes Catholicism as “the religion of the majority” of citizens and schools are required to teach it but it is not the official state religion. Public schools are required to teach Catholicism. The government generally turns to Catholic clergy to conduct religious invocations.

Muslims and Rastafarians reported some discrimination in employment. Muslims and Jews serve in the cabinet of President Juan Carlos Varela.

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials visited religious facilities with government leaders. They also met with the Ministry of Education to discuss the government’s allocation of subsidies to secular and religious schools. U.S. embassy officials met with other government and religious leaders, members of religious groups, and community organizations to discuss issues related to religious freedom, including societal perceptions and the treatment of members of religious groups. They met several times with Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Rastafarian, and evangelical leaders to discuss religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.7 million (July 2015 estimate). The government does not collect statistics on religious affiliation. Estimates from religious leaders and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) vary. Latinobarometro, a private nonprofit polling firm, estimates 72 percent of the population is Catholic. The Pew Research Center estimates 70 percent identify as Catholic and 19 percent as Protestant. Episcopalian and Methodist bishops put Episcopalians at 11,000 and Methodists at 1,500. Smaller religious groups, found primarily in Panama City or other larger urban areas, include Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Hindus, Buddhists, Bahais, and Rastafarians. Baptists, Methodists, and Lutherans derive their membership in large part from the African Antillean and expatriate communities.

Jewish leaders estimated their communities at approximately 15,000 members, centered largely in Panama City. Muslim communities, largely comprising

PANAMA

Arab-and Pakistani-origin individuals, number approximately 14,000 members and live primarily in Panama City, Colon City, and Penonome. There are approximately 850 Rastafarians, most of who live in La Chorrera, in the province of Panama Oeste. Indigenous religious groups, including Ibeorgun (among Kuna), Mama Tata and Mama Chi (among Ngobe Bugle), and Embera (among Embera), are found in their respective indigenous communities located throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious practices and provides for freedom of religion and worship, provided that “Christian morality and public order” are respected. It recognizes Catholicism as “the religion of the majority” of citizens but does not designate it as the official state religion. It limits the public offices religious leaders may hold to those related to social assistance, education, and scientific research, and forbids the formation of political parties based on religion.

The constitution grants legal status to religious associations so they may manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law. To register, the group must submit a power of attorney, charter, names of the board members (if applicable), copy of the internal bylaws (if applicable), and payment of four balboas (\$4) in fiscal duty stamps. Once the Ministry of Government (MOG) approves the registration, the religious association must ensure the resolution is included in the Public Registry. In order to receive clearance for duty-free imports, religious associations must receive their legal standing from the MOG, followed by a request with the Directorate of Internal Revenue of the Ministry of Economy and Finance. Upon approval by the Legislative Tax Committee and the cabinet, the government may donate government properties to registered religious associations. The law states income from religious activities is tax exempt as long as it is collected through such activities as church and burial services and charitable events. In order to receive clearance for duty-free imports, religious associations must receive their legal standing from the MOG, followed by a request with the Directorate of Internal Revenue of the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

The constitution requires public schools to provide instruction on Catholic teachings; however, parents have the right to exempt their children from religious

PANAMA

teaching. The constitution allows for the establishment of private schools. It prohibits discrimination toward public servants based on their religious practices or beliefs.

Immigration law grants foreign religious workers temporary missionary worker visas that must be renewed every two years, up to a total of six years. Catholic and Orthodox Christian priests and nuns are exempt from the renewal requirement and are issued a six-year visa. Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim clergy and other religious workers are also eligible for the special, automatic six-year visa, but must submit extra legal documents with their applications. These additional requirements include a copy of the organization's bylaws, the MOG-issued registration certificate, and a letter from the organization's leader in the country certifying the religious worker will be employed at its place of worship. The application fee is 250 balboas (\$250) for all religious denominations.

Government Practices

Some non-Catholic religious groups said Catholicism maintained certain state-sanctioned advantages over other faiths, such as a reliance on Catholic clergy to conduct religious invocations at government events. Many official celebrations included participation of the highest-ranking officials at Catholic masses. The government conducted a state funeral for former President Eric Arturo Delvalle according to Jewish traditions. Muslims and Jews serve in the cabinet of President Juan Carlos Varela.

Some non-Catholic religious leaders expressed concern the government gave preferential treatment to Catholic schools when allocating subsidies for religious schools. According to the Ministry of Education, 24 private schools were allocated approximately 325,000 balboas (\$325,000) in subsidies in 2015 and 2016. Schools receiving subsidies included Catholic, evangelical, Episcopal, and some secular schools that provided social programs similar to those religious schools provided. The government did not publish a breakdown of the different religious groups that received subsidies during the year. In October the Ministry of Education pledged to provide Christ's Episcopal Church in Colon with a 2.5 million balboa (\$2.5 million) subsidy from 2015 to 2020 for infrastructure, equipment, training, and scholarships to public school students.

According to a Rastafarian leader, the government did not consider Rastafarians a religious organization as the Rastafarian community had opted out of the

PANAMA

registration process. The Rastafarian Alliance of Panama had a permit issued by the MOG as an NGO.

Rastafarians, like Muslim women and Christian nuns, were required to remove their head covering when they applied for an identification card or passport and when they went through security screenings at airports. Civil registry and customs authorities, however, agreed to take the photographs and carry out the searches in private if Rastafarians so requested. Rastafarian leaders reported arbitrary strip searches by police agents decreased significantly over the last decade. They called this decline part of a broader trend of increased societal acceptance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The small African Panamanian Muslim community reported societal discrimination toward their members. Some members stated they failed to receive job offers when they said their potential employers, especially evangelical interviewers, assessed them based on their dress and appearance rather than their job qualifications.

The Ecumenical Committee of Panama, an interfaith committee made up of representatives of the Catholic, Episcopal, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Methodist, Evangelical, and Lutheran Churches, the Salvation Army, the Colon Islamic Congregation, and the Kol Shearith Reform Jewish Congregation met several times during the year. The committee provided a coordination mechanism for interfaith activities and promoted mutual respect and appreciation among the various religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials visited religious facilities with government leaders. They also met with the Ministry of Education to discuss the government's allocation of subsidies to secular and religious schools. U.S. embassy officials met with other government and religious leaders, members of religious groups, and community organizations to discuss issues related to religious freedom, including societal perceptions and the treatment of members of religious groups. They met several times with Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Rastafarian, and evangelical leaders to discuss religious freedom.