

GUYANA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship, including the right to choose and change one's religion. The government continued its policy to limit 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 with foreign missionaries continued to report, however, that the government's visa quotas allotted to them did not adversely affect their activities because the government did not apply the visa limitation rule.

Continued interfaith efforts conducted by the Inter-Religious Organization of Guyana again led to oral pledges to promote social cohesion and respect for ethnic and religious diversity.

Embassy officials joined the Ministry of Social Cohesion on several occasions throughout the year at interfaith and religious events. To promote religious tolerance, U.S. embassy officials attended events hosted by Muslim and Hindu communities, including Eid and Diwali celebrations. Embassy officials used these activities to speak about acceptance, tolerance, and harmony in a multi-faith cultural context. The embassy amplified its activities through discussions about religious tolerance on social media.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 741,000 (July 2018 estimate). According to the country's 2012 census, 64 percent of the population is Christian, 25 percent Hindu, 7 percent Muslim (mainly Sunni), and less than 1 percent belongs to other religious groups. Groups that together constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Rastafarians and Baha'is. An estimated 3 percent of the population does not profess a religious affiliation. Among Christians, Pentecostals comprise 23 percent of the national population; Roman Catholics, 7 percent; Anglicans, 5 percent; Seventh-day Adventists, 5 percent; Methodists, 1 percent; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), less than 1 percent, and other Christians, 21 percent. The 21 percent includes Christians who belong to the Assembly of God Church, Church of Christ, and African Episcopal Methodist Zion Church, among others. The Church of Jesus Christ estimates its membership at approximately 5,800.

The membership of most religious groups includes a cross section of ethnic groups, although nearly all Hindus are of South Asian descent and most Rastafarians are of African descent.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship, including the right to choose and change one's religion. An unenforced law prescribes a prison term of one year for a blasphemous libel conviction; however, the law exempts religious expression made in "good faith and decent language."

There is no official system for formal registration of a religious group, but to receive government recognition, all places of worship must register through the deeds registry. 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 nonprofit organizations, allowing the organization to conduct financial operations, buy property, and receive tax benefits in its name.

Foreign religious workers require a visa from the Ministry of Citizenship. Religious groups seeking to enter an indigenous village for the purpose of proselytizing must apply for and obtain the permission from the village council. An application to a village council must include the name of the group, the names of its members who will be going to the village, their purpose, and estimated date of arrival.

There are both public and private religiously-affiliated schools. Private schools are operated entirely by private groups and are not funded by the state. Students of private schools must pay fees to attend, and the state does not control those fees. Religious education is compulsory in all private schools with a religious affiliation. All students attending a private school of religious affiliation must participate in religious education, regardless of a student's religious beliefs. There is no religious education in public schools, regardless of whether the school is religiously affiliated. Most public schools' religious affiliations are Anglican or Methodist.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Representatives of the Rastafarian community continued to state that a law criminalizing the possession of 15 grams or more of marijuana infringed on their religious practices. The Guyana Rastafari Council continued to petition the government to legalize the use of small amounts of marijuana for religious purposes, but authorities reportedly again did not consider the proposal, stating that reviewing drug legislation remained a low priority for the government.

The government continued to maintain regulations limiting 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; however, the government and religious groups with foreign missionaries continued to report that the visa limitation rule was not applied. Religious groups also reported that the visa quotas the government allotted to them were sufficient and did not adversely affect their activities.

The Guyana Defense Force (GDF) continued to coordinate with civilian religious groups to provide military personnel with access to religious services. Leaders of the country's three major religious groups – Christian, Hindu, and Muslim – conducted prayer services and counseling on GDF bases.

The Ministry of Social Cohesion continued to promote interfaith harmony and respect for diversity. In March the ministry held a “harmony village” in the capital city of Georgetown to promote tolerance of various ethnic and religious identities. Various stakeholders and religious groups participated.

Government representatives met with leaders of various religious groups to promote social cohesion and discuss tolerance of diversity. Government officials also participated regularly in the observance of Christian, Hindu, and Muslim religious holidays throughout the year.

In February members of parliament and government ministers participated in an interfaith ceremony whose stated purpose was to celebrate the country's religious freedom and diversity. The ceremony included the participation of representatives of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Faithist, and Baha'i groups, as well as the Arreuya indigenous community.

The government continued to declare some holy days of the country's three major religious groups as national holidays.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Continued interfaith efforts conducted by the Inter-Religious Organization of Guyana – comprising various Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups – again led to individual and organizational oral pledges to promote social cohesion and respect for ethnic and religious diversity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials joined the Ministry of Social Cohesion on several occasions throughout the year at interfaith and religious events, including a prayer breakfast at the launch of Interfaith Harmony Week in January and Phagwah celebrations in March. After these events, embassy officials engaged in social media discussions on religious tolerance in the country's pluralistic society.

U.S. embassy officials met with representatives of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups and discussed issues related to religious tolerance. To encourage tolerance for religious diversity, embassy officials attended religious events hosted by various religious groups. Embassy officials also attended government-hosted interfaith functions to support and advance religious tolerance and inclusion. At these events, embassy officials spoke on the values of acceptance, tolerance, and harmony in a multi-faith cultural context. The embassy amplified these activities through discussions on social media about religious tolerance.