

GUYANA 2019 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. 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 government continued to hold interfaith activities promoting religious tolerance and diversity. In February the Ministry of Social Cohesion hosted an interfaith awareness exercise in Bartica, a small town located in Cuyuni-Mazaruni Region. Also 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 Inter-Religious Organization of Guyana, whose members include representatives of the Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Baha'is and Rastafarian faiths, continued to conduct interfaith efforts, and member religious groups again made oral pledges to promote social cohesion and respect religious diversity.

U.S. embassy officials joined the Ministry of Social Cohesion on several occasions throughout the year at interfaith and religious events and discussed efforts to promote social cohesion and religious tolerance with government officials. Embassy officials met with representatives of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups and discussed issues related to religious tolerance. At events hosted by Muslim and Hindu communities, including Eid and Diwali celebrations, embassy officials spoke about acceptance, tolerance, and harmony in a multifaith 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 745,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 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, Baha'is, Afro-descendent Faithists, and Areruya, an indigenous faith system. 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, which includes those belonging 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 permission from the village council. 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. All students attending a private religious school 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 according to the council, authorities again would 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 state the visa limitation rule was not applied. Religious groups also said 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 – continued to conduct prayer services and counseling on GDF bases.

The Ministry of Social Cohesion continued to promote interfaith harmony and respect for diversity. In February the ministry hosted an interfaith sensitization exercise in Bartica, a small town located in the Cuyuni-Mazaruni interior region of the country. The government reported that the exercise was held in Bartica to promote religion and social cohesion to mitigate crimes and gender-based violence in Bartica. The exercise also promoted tolerance of various ethnic and religious identities and led to the formation of a social cohesion committee for Bartica. The committee's stated objectives were to promote social cohesion as well as address the town's concerns about small crimes and other social issues. Government officials, including Minister of Social Cohesion George Norton, and representatives from religious groups and organizations, among them the Central Islamic Organization of Guyana (CIOG) and the Christian, Muslim, and Hindu religious core groups, participated in the exercise. Formed in 2017, the four core

groups comprise one representative each from the Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Rastafarian communities.

Government representatives continued to meet with leaders of various religious groups to promote social cohesion and discuss tolerance of diversity, including Muslim, Hindu and Christian groups. 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 annual 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 faiths, as well as followers of the Areruya indigenous faith system.

The government continued to declare some holy days of the country's three major religious groups as national holidays, including the Eid al-Adha, Easter, and Diwali. In March the Ministry of Social Cohesion hosted a cultural program to celebrate Phagwah, the Hindu spring festival. In August the Ethnic Relations Commission, a quasi-government organization that promotes cohesion, encouraged all citizens to "embrace the message of Eid al-Adha in Guyana's multireligious society."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Inter-Religious Organization of Guyana – comprising various Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups – continued to lead interfaith efforts, and there were again individual and organizational oral pledges to promote social cohesion and respect for ethnic and religious diversity. In March the CIOG hosted an International Peace Conference to encourage all peoples to emulate peace and desist from violence. In April political parties, nongovernmental organizations and some members of the business community encouraged all Guyanese to embrace the message of Easter. Similar sentiments were expressed by nongovernmental organizations for Phagwah in March.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials attended government-hosted interfaith functions to support and advance religious tolerance and inclusion and raised with government officials the importance of the government's continued promotion of religious tolerance.

Embassy officials joined the Ministry of Social Cohesion on several occasions throughout the year at interfaith and religious events, including at Hindu Phagwah celebrations in March. After these events, embassy officials engaged in social media discussions on religious tolerance in the country's pluralistic society.

In March the Ambassador delivered remarks at the CIOG-hosted International Peace Conference where she discussed religious diversity and tolerance. Embassy officials met with representatives of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups and discussed issues related to religious tolerance, including ways to foster cohesion and respect for religious differences. To encourage tolerance for religious diversity, embassy officials attended religious events hosted by various religious groups. At these events, embassy officials spoke on the values of acceptance, tolerance, and harmony in a multifaith cultural context. The embassy amplified these activities through discussions on social media about religious tolerance, conveying messages emphasizing the importance of religious tolerance. Following the Ambassador's meeting with the Inter-Religious Organization of Guyana in June, the embassy posted on social media her comments noting the organization's work towards fostering peace and unity.