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USDOS – US Department of State

2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Panama

Executive Summary

The constitution, laws, and executive 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, but not as the state religion. The law continued to require Muslim women, Catholic nuns, and Rastafarians to pull back their head coverings to show their ears in pictures taken by immigration officials, but civil registry and customs authorities agreed to take the photographs and conduct any body searches in private. According to a Muslim community leader, the community did not receive any complaints regarding these procedures. Public schools continued to teach Catholicism, but parents could exempt their children from religion classes. Some non-Catholic groups continued to state that the government provided preferential distribution of subsidies to small Catholic-run private schools for salaries and operating expenses.

The Inter-Religious Institute of Panama, an interfaith organization with a wide range of associated religious groups, expanded its membership while continuing to provide a coordination mechanism for interfaith activities and promote mutual respect and appreciation among the various religious groups. Several religious groups held interdenominational events, including a Jewish community-hosted iftar to honor the leaders of an Islamic cultural center; a Muslim-Arab community-hosted interreligious youth day camp; a joint Catholic-Jewish youth event; and an interfaith event to celebrate the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. On September 10, members of the Inter-Religious Institute announced the institute would host youths during the World Youth Day in 2019, including hosting Catholic travelers in the homes of Muslim, Bahai, Jewish, and non-Catholic Christian faiths.

Embassy officials met on several occasions with government officials and raised questions about fairness in education subsidies for religious schools and the need for equality of all religious groups before the law. The Ambassador and other embassy officials met frequently with Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Rastafarian, Bahai, Episcopalian, Lutheran, and evangelical Protestant leaders to discuss government treatment of members of religious groups and interfaith initiatives to promote tolerance and respect for religious diversity, and societal perceptions and treatment of members of religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.8 million (July 2017 estimate). The Ministry of Health estimates 69.7 percent of the population is Catholic and 18 percent evangelical Protestant. Episcopalians and Methodist bishops state their communities have 11,000 and 1,500 members, respectively, and the Lutheran Church states there are 1,000 Lutherans. 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, Pentecostals, and Rastafarians. Baptists and Methodists derive their membership in large part from the African Antillean and expatriate communities.

Jewish leaders estimate their community at approximately 15,000 members, centered largely in Panama City. The Muslim community, largely comprising Arab and Pakistani-origin individuals, numbers approximately 14,000 and is centered primarily in Panama City, Colon City, and Penonome in Coclé Province, and includes smaller congregations in David in Chiriquí Province and Santiago in Veraguas Province. There are approximately 850 Rastafarians, most of whom live in Colon City and La Chorrera, Panama Oeste. Indigenous religious groups, including Ibeorgun (prevalent among the Guna community), Mama Tata and Mama Chi (prevalent among the Ngobe Bugle community), and Embera (prevalent among the Embera community), 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 state religion. It limits the public offices religious ministers and members of religious orders may hold to those related to social assistance, education, and scientific research. It forbids the formation of political parties based on religion. The constitution prohibits discrimination toward public servants based on their religious practices or beliefs.

The constitution grants legal status to religious associations, permitting them to manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law. If groups decline to register, they are unable to apply for grants or subsidies. To register, the group must submit to the Ministry of Government (MOG) a power of attorney, charter, names of the board members (if applicable), a copy of the internal bylaws (if applicable), and a payment of four balboas (\$4) for processing. Once the MOG approves the registration, the religious association must then register the MOG's resolution in the Public Registry. Registered religious associations must apply to the Directorate of Internal Revenue of the Ministry of Economy and Finance in order to receive clearance for duty-free imports. The government may grant government properties to registered

religious associations, upon approval by the Legislative Tax Committee and the cabinet. 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.

The constitution requires public schools to provide instruction on Catholic teachings. Parents have the right to exempt their children from religious education. The constitution also allows for the establishment of private religious schools. It is illegal to determine enrollment of students in private schools based on religion. Students of a separate faith from their educational institution are allowed to practice their religion freely.

Immigration law grants foreign religious workers temporary missionary worker visas that must be renewed every two years, for 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 additional documentation with their applications. This discrepancy is due to an article in the constitution that allows for all religions to worship freely, with no limitation other than “respect for Christian morality.” 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.

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

Government Practices

The government did not consider Rastafarians a religious organization because the community had chosen not to register as a religion. Instead, the MOG issued the Rastafarian Alliance of Panama a permit to function as a nongovernmental organization. According to a Rastafarian leader, the group continued to operate under this permit without difficulties.

The government continued to rely primarily on Catholic clergy to conduct religious invocations at government events. Many official celebrations included participation of the highest-ranking officials at Catholic masses. Muslims and Jews continued to serve in senior positions in the government.

The law continued to require Muslim women, Catholic nuns, and Rastafarians to pull back their head covering to show their ears in pictures taken by immigration officials upon their arrival in the country. Civil registry and customs authorities, however, continued to allow the taking of photographs and conducting body searches in private if Rastafarians, Muslims, and other individuals wearing religious garments requested to do so. According to a Muslim community leader, the community did not receive any complaints regarding these procedures.

Catholic schools continued to represent the majority of parochial education; non-Catholic religious schools also received equal consideration of government grants. The Ministry of Education reported that in accordance with a decree mandating “fair and equitable allocation of funds to schools,” it had granted government subsidies ranging from 5,000 to 50,000 balboas (\$5,000 to \$50,000) to small religious and nonreligious private schools, including a Catholic school and an evangelical Protestant school. The Ministry of Education also provided a subsidy of 367,000 balboas (\$367,000) to an Anglican school to cover the school’s annual teacher and administrative staff annual payroll. Another evangelical Protestant school reportedly did not receive a subsidy because it had not opened a required bank account.

The government provided 90,000 balboas (\$90,000) for social programs conducted by the Catholic-run school Colegio Javier. In February the National Assembly Budget Committee approved the government’s request for additional funds to reconstruct several Catholic facilities in Herrera Province. In May the government assigned 210,359 balboas (\$210,359) to build a new Catholic church in Valle Rico, Las Tablas. The funds were allocated from the budget of the Social Assistance Directorate, an office within the Ministry of the Presidency.

In January the National Assembly hosted a ceremony to celebrate International Holocaust Remembrance Day, with the Israeli Ambassador as guest speaker. The event was attended by government representatives and included prayers by the rabbis of the three Panamanian-Jewish congregations. Holocaust survivor Gerta Stern and the Catholic Archbishop of Panama both attended.

Throughout the year, the government coordinated closely with the Catholic Church on preparations for World Youth Day, which the country is scheduled to host in January 2019. Some social media commentators criticized the use of public funds for the religious event, which is cosponsored by Pope Francis and Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew. In August the government’s Technical Secretariat for Social Development hosted members of the Inter-Religious Institute for a private briefing on government programs and achievements related to promoting respect for religious diversity and tolerance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Inter-Religious Institute of Panama, an interfaith committee made up of representatives of the Catholic, Episcopal, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Methodist, evangelical Protestant, and Lutheran churches, Salvation Army, Colon Islamic Congregation, the Bahai Faith, and Kol Shearith Jewish Congregation, continued to meet several times during the year. It held several joint public events with religious groups, including a celebration of the country’s entry into the World Cup, during which they raised the importance of tolerance and respect for religious diversity. The institute provided a coordination mechanism for interfaith activities and promoted mutual respect and appreciation among the various religious groups.

On May 9-12, the government hosted the Fifth International Forum by the Global Network of Religions for Children. The organization stated it chose the country as the first Latin American country to host the event due to the eight years of successful activism by the Inter-Religious Institute. Both President Juan Carlos Varela and First Lady Lorena Castillo de Varela served as guest speakers at different events held by the forum.

In June members of the National Jewish Congress (Kol Shearith Congregation) hosted the first-ever iftar in Panama City to honor the leaders of the Islamic Cultural Center of Colon. Clergy members Sheikh Mohamed El Sayyed and Rabbi Gustavo Kraselnik also participated. Prior to the dinner, the Colon Arab Islamic representatives were given a space for their prayers at the synagogue.

In May the Arab School of Colon hosted a day camp for youth of all faiths, and in June youth from the Catholic St. Luke Evangelist community joined youth from the Kol Shearith Jewish in a Jewish-Catholic fraternity march.

On September 1, members of the Kol Shearith Jewish congregation, along with the Episcopal, Catholic, and Greek Orthodox communities, travelled to Cocle Province to hold an interfaith event to celebrate the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, a joint initiative of Pope Francis and Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew. Regional government representatives from the Ministry of the Environment, Aquatic Resources Authority of Panama, and Penonome mayor's office attended.

On September 10, members of the Inter-Religious Institute announced the institute would host youths during the World Youth Day in 2019. The group stated it would foster interfaith respect and cooperation by hosting Catholic travelers in the homes of Muslims, Bahais, Jews, and non-Catholic Christians.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials engaged with the Ministry of Education and the Ombudsman's Office to discuss government policies regarding the equal treatment of all religious groups and individuals, including those belonging to religious minorities, and to inquire about any open religious discrimination claims submitted to the government, such as fairness in education subsidies for religious schools.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with 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. The Ambassador and embassy representatives met several times with the principal leaders of the country's largest religious groups, including Catholic priest Manuel A. Diaz, a Catholic representative to the Inter-Religious Institute; Jewish Kol Shearith Congregation President Moises Abadi and Rabbi Gustavo Kraselnik of the congregation; Episcopal Bishop Julio Murray; Colon Islamic leader Luis Ibrahim; evangelical Protestant Pastor Edwin Alvarez, leader of the largest evangelical community in the country; Nessim Bassan, President of the Hebrew National Council, which gathers the associations of the Sheveth Ahim Jewish congregation; Rabbi Aaron

Laine of the Beth El Jewish congregation; and Gilberto Toro of the Rastafarian community. In May the Ambassador hosted 15 religious leaders for a roundtable discussion on freedom of religion and spoke about the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. In November the Ambassador and other embassy officials attended a Shabbat dinner hosted by the Beth El congregation Rabbi Aaron Laine and members of his community where religious freedom and other shared values were discussed.

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