

# **GUYANA 2017 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 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 continued to report, however, that the government's visa quotas allotted to them did not adversely affect their activities because the visa limitation rule was applied infrequently.

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

The U.S. embassy hosted an interfaith forum on November 15 to highlight and promote tolerance among various religious groups, including the Muslim, Christian, Rastafari, and Hindu communities. A panel of religious leaders shared ways in which their respective faiths promoted their beliefs while adhering to religious tolerance principles. 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 on acceptance, tolerance, and harmony in a multifaith cultural context. The embassy amplified its activities through discussions on social media about religious tolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 738,000 (July 2017 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 belong to other religious groups. 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; 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. Groups that together constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Rastafarians and Bahais. An estimated 3 percent of the population does not profess a religious affiliation.

The membership of most religious groups includes a cross section of ethnic groups, although nearly all Hindus are of Indian 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 Amerindian 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, whether religiously affiliated or not. 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**

Created in 2015, the government's Ministry of Social Cohesion's mandate includes promoting interfaith harmony and respect for diversity. In February President David Granger said the state was responsible for ensuring social cohesion and interfaith harmony is not left to chance, the main reasons his government had established the ministry. In March the ministry held several "harmony villages" across the country to promote tolerance of various cultures and ethnic and religious identities. In May the ministry launched a five-year strategic plan to promote social cohesion.

Representatives of the Rastafarian community said that a law criminalizing the possession of 15 grams or more of marijuana infringed on their religious practices. A representative of the Rastafari Council said some members of his community faced extra scrutiny from law enforcement officials who believed Rastafaris carried marijuana on their person. According to the same representative, the Rastafari community perceived they were employed at lower rates than other citizens. The council petitioned the government to legalize the use of small amounts of marijuana for religious purposes, but authorities reportedly did not consider the proposal, saying that reviewing drug legislation was not a state priority at that time. On August 17, the Alliance For Change, a faction of the coalition government, said that it would advance the concerns of the Rastafarian group at parliament.

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, religious groups continued to report the visa quotas the government allotted to them did not adversely affect their activities, as the visa limitation rule was rarely applied.

In March foreign Christian missionaries proselytized in some urban public schools. Representatives of the Hindu community stated that proselytizing in public schools is unconstitutional and the government should denounce it. In April the government stated that proselytizing in public schools is prohibited, and it disciplined the administrators of three public schools for permitting religious proselytizing by the foreign Christian missionaries in the three schools.

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

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, Muslim, and Hindu religious holidays throughout the year.

In February the president, first lady, and government ministers participated in an interfaith ceremony, whose stated purpose was to celebrate the country's religious freedom and diversity.

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

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

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom. Interfaith efforts conducted by the Inter-Religious Organization of Guyana led to 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. After these events, embassy officials engaged in social media discussions on religious tolerance in the country's pluralistic society.

On November 15, in observance of United Nation's International Day of Tolerance, the embassy convened a panel of Muslim, Christian, Rastafari, and Hindu representatives to highlight and promote tolerance among various religious groups. The panel comprised leaders from the Central Islamic Organization, Council of Churches, Rastafari Council, and Pandits Council, representing local Hindu temples. The audience, which included civil society leaders and members of various faith communities, engaged with panelists and made comments on the role that religious tolerance played in the country. The panelists pledged to hold regular interreligious dialogues and continue collaborating on humanitarian projects to maintain their peaceful coexistence. Embassy representatives met with representatives of the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian religious groups and discussed issues relating to religious tolerance. Embassy representatives attended various religious events hosted by the Muslim and Hindu communities. Embassy officials

also attended interfaith functions hosted by the government to support and advance religious tolerance and inclusion. At these events, embassy officials spoke on acceptance, tolerance, and harmony in a multifaith cultural context. The embassy amplified its activities through discussions on social media about religious tolerance.