

# **PANAMA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **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 and requires Catholic instruction in public schools, with exemptions allowed. According to religious group representatives, the discretionary power of immigration officials made entry of missionaries from certain countries more difficult. Central American missionaries from the Balboa Union Church and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) said immigration authorities delayed or questioned their visits for pastoral work. During the year, some indigenous persons declined COVID-19 vaccines due to their religious beliefs. In November, health officials reported on television that some new COVID-19 cases occurred in families that chose not to vaccinate because of their religious beliefs.

Representatives from the Interreligious Institute of Panama said that although authorities generally respected the institute, officials did not always solicit its opinions on decisions that impacted general issues of religious freedom and practice. According to the representatives, the group felt strongly about the need to create a government-level Secretariat for Religious Affairs similar to the existing secretariats for Afro-descendants and persons with disabilities. At public events, the government continued to invite primarily Roman Catholic clergy to offer religious invocations.

According to evangelical Christian leader Pastor Alvarez, evangelical churches continued to decline to join the Interreligious Institute of Panama, preferring their own assembly, a large nationwide group that includes all evangelical churches. On November 3, to celebrate independence from Colombia, and again on November 28 to celebrate independence from Spain, leaders of the Interreligious Institute of Panama prayed together during a Roman Catholic Mass at the National Cathedral.

Throughout the year, the U.S. embassy engaged government officials on issues of religious freedom. In August, the Charge d'Affaires asked that immigration authorities ensure rules were applied equally and transparently when processing missionary visas. Additionally, the Charge d'Affaires hosted an interfaith roundtable in August.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.9 million (midyear 2021), with Roman Catholics comprising 49 percent of the population and evangelical Christians 30 percent. Jewish leaders estimate their community at 15,000 members, centered largely in Panama City. According to a Shia Muslim leader, the Muslim community, including Shia and Sunni, numbers approximately 14,000 and is centered primarily in Panama City, Colon, and Penonome, with smaller concentrations in David and Santiago in the western part of the country. Shia Muslims are primarily of Lebanese origin, and Sunni Muslims are primarily of Arab and Pakistani origin. Episcopalian bishops state their community has 11,000 members. The Baha'i community reports between 4,000 and 6,000 members; the Buddhist community 3,000 members; the Methodist Church 1,500 members; and the Lutheran Church 1,000 members. The Rastafarian community increased slightly and is estimated at 1,000 members. Most Rastafarians live in Colon City, Panama City and La Chorrera, but there are members in David, Chiriqui and Bocas Island, Bocas del Toro.

Other religious groups, found primarily in Panama City and other large urban areas, include Seventh-day Adventists, the Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, and Pentecostals. Baptists and Methodists derive their membership in large part from the African Antillean and expatriate communities. There are also a small number of Babalaos represented by two separate organizations. Babalaos are associated with Cuba's Santeria religion, which is based on Yoruba religious tradition.

Indigenous religions, including Ibeorgun (prevalent among Guna Panamanians), Mama Tata and Mama Chi (prevalent among Ngabe-Bugle Panamanians), and Embera (prevalent among the Embera Panamanians), are found in their respective indigenous communities located throughout the country. Estimating the size of indigenous religious populations remains difficult, but according to indigenous representatives, Mama Tata and Mama Chi practitioners number in the tens of thousands, and Inbeorgun and Embera practitioners likely number in the thousands.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution, laws, and executive decrees prohibit discrimination based on religious practices and provide for freedom of religion and worship, provided that "Christian morality and public order" are respected. The constitution recognizes

Catholicism as the religion of the majority of citizens but does not designate it as the state religion. It limits the public offices clergy 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 grants legal status to religious groups, permitting them to manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law. If groups decline to register, they may not apply for grants or subsidies. To register, a group must submit to the Ministry of Government (MOG) a power of attorney, charter, names of its board members (if applicable), a copy of the internal bylaws (if applicable), and a four-balboa (\$4) processing fee. Once the MOG approves the registration, the religious association must record 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 to receive clearance for duty-free imports. The government may allot publicly owned properties to registered religious associations upon approval by the Legislative Tax Committee and the cabinet. The law states that income from religious activities is tax-exempt as long as it is collected through such activities as church and burial services, and charitable events.

Registered religious groups are the Roman Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox Church, Episcopal Church, Methodist Church, Evangelical Methodist Church, the Baha'i Faith, Soka Gakkai International (Buddhist), Church of Jesus Christ, Muslim Congregation of Colon, Muslim Congregation of Panama City, Muslim Congregation of Cocolé Province, Muslim Congregation of Chiriqui Province, Jewish Kol Shearith Israel Congregation, Jewish Shevet Ahim Congregation, Jewish Beth El Congregation, Baptist Church, Hossana Evangelical Church, Casa de Oracion (house of prayer) Cristiana Evangelical Church, Pentecostal Church, Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church, Crossroads Christian Church, Ministry of the Family Christian Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Rastafarian congregation and the Babalaos have chosen not to register.

By law, indigenous tribes control their own autonomous lands within the country, which are called *comarcas* (literally "counties," but similar to U.S. Native American tribal nations). According to the law, tribal autonomy allows the practice of religion and cultural traditions without interference from the state.

The ombudsman mediates disputes but the office's formal recommendations are not binding. The ombudsman may act only if the office receives a formal complaint, or if a complaint is made public through media.

The constitution requires public schools to provide instruction on Catholic teachings. Parents may exempt their children from religious education. The constitution also allows the establishment of private religious schools. Private religious schools may not refuse to enroll a student who is not a member of the religious group sponsoring the school.

Vaccinations are not mandatory for enrollment in school.

Immigration law grants foreign religious workers temporary missionary worker visas that they must renew every two years, for up to a total of six years. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian priests and nuns are exempt from the two-year renewal requirement and issued six-year visas, with no limitation other than "respect for Christian morality." Clergy of other religious groups, as well as other religious workers, are also eligible for the special six-year visa but must submit additional documentation 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.

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

### **Government Practices**

According to religious group representatives, the discretionary power of immigration officials made entry of missionaries from certain countries more difficult. During the year, Central American missionaries from the Balboa Union Church and the Church of Jesus Christ said immigration authorities delayed or questioned their visits for pastoral work. Representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ said two young Nicaraguan missionaries experienced mistreatment and officials did not allow entry into the country in July and August, despite government approval of their missionary visas. Representatives stated there was miscommunication between the National Migration Service and its airport immigration officers. These officers eventually allowed the missionaries to enter the country after repeated engagement between church leaders and immigration authorities.

Baha'i representatives said they decided to have short-term foreign missionaries enter the country on legal 90-day tourist visas due to the complexity of the religious visa process. Some religious leaders suggested that immigration authorities should better educate their officers and airport agents or create a special unit of officers with expertise in processing missionary visas, to prevent problems arising from officers' abuse of their discretionary authority.

According to a Baha'i representative, during the year Baha'i members encountered administrative difficulties with local and central authorities. Some Baha'is said challenges in resolving such issues resulted from their minority religious status. As an example, they cited informal street vendors who illegally installed kiosks at the entrance of the private road to their temple. The congregation made numerous formal complaints to the local mayor's office about the illegal kiosks, but without successful resolution. By year's end, the mayor's office had taken no action and, according to the Baha'i community, had failed to respond to follow-up telephone calls. The operating concession for a Baha'i radio station in Soloy town in the Ngabe Bugle territory expired during the year, and Baha'i representatives filed for an extension with the Public Services Authority (ASEP), which regulates communications. According to concerned individuals, ASEP officers mistakenly classified their request as a commercial one despite the Baha'is' status as a registered religious denomination with legal standing as a nonprofit organization. At year's end, ASEP had not corrected the file nor extended the concession.

Members of non-Catholic religious groups said the constitution was ambiguous, in that it forbade religious discrimination, yet designated Catholicism as the sole religion taught in public schools.

Some religious leaders, including Jewish, Islamic, and evangelical Christian leaders, opposed inclusion of a question in the next national census (date to be determined) about an individual's religious affiliation. Sources stated that concern about the government mandating a response on religious affiliation and collecting lists of minority religions generally fueled the leaders' opposition. Leaders cited examples of similar opposition in other countries, including the United States. According to Roman Catholic representatives, however, the church did not oppose including the question. Government officials said the government had no plans to include such a question.

During the year, some indigenous persons declined COVID-19 vaccines due to their religious beliefs. In November, health officials reported on television that

some new COVID-19 cases occurred in families that chose not to vaccinate because of their religious beliefs.

Representatives from the Interreligious Institute of Panama said that although authorities generally respected the institute, officials did not always solicit its opinions on decisions that impacted general issues of religious freedom and practice. According to the representatives, the group felt strongly about the need to create a government-level Secretariat for Religious Affairs similar to the existing secretariats for Afro-descendants and persons with disabilities.

At public events, the government continued to invite primarily Roman Catholic clergy to offer religious invocations.

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

The Interreligious Institute of Panama, an interfaith committee made up of representatives of Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, and other Protestant churches, Salvation Army, Colon Islamic Congregation, the Baha'i Faith, Kol Shearith Jewish Congregation, and the Buddhist Soka Gakkai Congregation, continued to meet virtually several times during the year. It met in person for the first time in July. The institute's objectives included providing a coordination mechanism for interfaith activities and promoting mutual respect and appreciation among the various religious groups, as well as sharing best practices for helping their congregations continue to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Evangelical Christian leader Pastor Alvarez, evangelical churches continued to decline to join the institute, preferring their own assembly, a large nationwide group that includes all evangelical churches.

On November 3, to celebrate independence from Colombia, and again on November 28 to celebrate independence from Spain, leaders of the Interreligious Institute of Panama prayed together during a Roman Catholic Mass at the National Cathedral.

On November 26, during the official presentation of the "Bicentennial Pact," only members of Roman Catholic clergy led opening prayers. All of these events occurred with governmental officials and members of the diplomatic corps in attendance.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Throughout the year, embassy officials engaged the government on issues of religious freedom. In August, the Charge d’Affaires discussed with immigration authorities the process for issuing missionary visas in an equitable and transparent manner.

In August, the Charge d’Affaires hosted an interfaith roundtable in which leaders from different religious groups shared their views about religious issues and their status in the country in general. Episcopal, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Kol Shearith-Israel Jewish Congregation, Colon Islamic Iman, Balboa Union Church, Baha’i, Buddhist, and Church of Jesus Christ leaders attended the event.

Embassy officials also engaged with individual leaders of minority religious groups during the year, including those of the Baha’i community, the Jewish community, the Balboa Union Church, and the Church of Jesus Christ.

The embassy used social media channels periodically to commemorate major holidays of various religions and to recognize International Religious Freedom Day in October.