

SURINAME 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and both the constitution and the penal code prohibit discrimination based on religion. Any violation can be brought before a court of justice. Religious groups are not legally required to register but those that do may receive financial support from the government. The government provided limited subsidies to a number of elementary and secondary schools established and managed by various religious groups.

The Inter-Religious Council (IRIS), an initiative by some of the country's religious groups, met monthly to discuss planned interfaith activities and positions on government policies. The IRIS chairman said the council expressed support for freedom of religious practice and encouraged mutual respect among religious groups.

U.S. embassy officials interacted with the Christian, Hindu, and Muslim communities, and exchanged information about religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 580,000 (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2012 census, 48 percent of the population is Christian, of which 22 percent is Roman Catholic. Other groups, including Moravian, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, evangelical Protestant, Baptist, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), make up the remainder of the Christian population. Hindus are 22 percent of the population, including the Sanathan Dharma and the Arya Dewaker. Muslims, including Sunni and Ahmadi Muslims and the World Islamic Call Society, are 14 percent.

Some Amerindian and Maroon populations, approximately 3 percent of the population, adhere to indigenous religions. Certain Amerindian groups, concentrated principally in the interior and to a lesser extent in coastal areas, practice shamanism through a medicine man (*piaiman*). Many Maroons worship nature. Those of Amerindian and Maroon origin who identify as Christian often combine Christian practices with indigenous religious customs. Additionally, some Creoles in urban areas worship their ancestors through a rite called *wintie*.

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The remaining 13 percent includes Bahais, Jews, Buddhists, Brahma Kumaris, Society of Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas), and three Rastafarian organizations of the Aya Bingi Order, 12th Tribe, and Bobo Shanti.

There is a correlation between ethnicity and religion. The Hindustani-speaking population is primarily Hindu, while some ethnic Indians, Javanese, and Creoles practice Islam. Christianity crosses all ethnic backgrounds.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states that everyone has freedom of religion and individuals may not be discriminated against on the grounds of religion. Individuals may choose or change their religion. Any violation can be brought before a court of justice.

Religious groups are not required to register, but must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs if they seek financial support from the government. To register, religious groups must supply contact information, a history of their group, and addresses for houses of worship. Most religious groups are officially registered.

Religious organizations can apply for financial support from the government if they seek a stipend for their clergy or if they have projects “of a moral nature.” The government also pays a stipend to clergy from registered religious groups officiating at weddings.”

The penal code provides punishment for those who instigate hate or discrimination of persons based on religion or creed in any way. Those found guilty may be sentenced to a prison term of no longer than one year and a fine of up to 25,000 Surinamese dollars (SRD) (\$6,250). In cases where the insult or act of hatred is instigated by more than one person, as part of an organization, or by a person who makes such statements habitually or as part of work, the punishment can include imprisonment of up to two years and fines of up to SRD 50,000 (\$12,500).

The law does not permit religious instruction in public schools, although these schools celebrate various religious holidays. Some religious groups manage their own primary and secondary schools, which include religious instruction. Parents may not homeschool children for religious or other reasons.

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Government Practices

The government provided limited subsidies to a number of elementary and secondary schools established and managed by various religious groups. While teachers were civil service employees, religious groups provided all funding, including construction costs, funding for school furniture, supplies, maintenance, and other accompanying costs with the exception of a small maintenance stipend for the schools.

The armed forces maintained a staff chaplaincy with Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic clergy available to military personnel. While the chaplaincy provided interfaith services, personnel were also welcome to attend outside religious services.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

IRIS, an initiative of the country's different religious groups, included two Hindu groups, two Muslim groups, and the Catholic Church. The council met monthly to discuss planned interfaith activities and positions on government policies. There was no official government counterpart to the IRIS, but government officials consulted with the council. The IRIS chairman said the council expressed support for freedom of religious practice and encouraged mutual respect among religious

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials interacted with the Muslim, Hindu, and Christian communities, and exchanged information about religious freedom.