

# **GUYANA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship, including the right to choose and change his religion. The government limited 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 reported, however, the visa quotas allotted to them did not adversely affect their activities, as the visa-limitation rule was rarely applied stringently.

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

In order to promote religious freedom and tolerance, U.S. embassy officials attended events hosted by Muslim and Hindu communities, including Eid and Diwali celebrations. The embassy amplified their activities through discussions on social media.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 736,000 (July 2016 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 belong to other religious groups. Among Christians, Pentecostals make up 23 percent of the total population; Roman Catholics, 7 percent; Anglicans, 5 percent; Seventh-day Adventists, 5 percent; Methodists, 1 percent; and other Christians, 21 percent. 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 any 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 requires a prison term of

one year for a blasphemous libel conviction, but exempts religious expression made in “good faith and decent language.”

There is no system to register a religious group, but to receive formal recognition all places of worship must be registered with the government 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 not-for-profit organizations, which allows 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 Amerindian villages for the purpose of proselytizing must apply for and obtain the permission from the village council.

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 pay fees to attend, which are not controlled by the government. Religious education is compulsory in all private schools with a religious affiliation. 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**

The government declared holy days of Guyana’s three major religious groups as national holidays.

The government maintained regulations which limited 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 reported the visa quotas allotted to them did not adversely affect their activities, as the visa-limitation rule was rarely applied stringently.

The Guyana Defense Force (GDF) coordinated with civilian religious groups to provide military personnel with access to religious services. Leaders of the three major religious groups conducted prayer services and counseling on GDF bases.

Government representatives participated regularly in the observance of Christian, Muslim, and Hindu religious holidays throughout the year. In September the president and government ministers participated in an interfaith ceremony to celebrate the country's indigenous people.

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

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

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

U.S. embassy officials joined the Ministry of Social Cohesion on several occasions throughout the year at interfaith and religious events. Embassy officials engaged in social media discussions and promotion of religious freedom and tolerance after these events.

Embassy representatives met with the major religious groups and attended various religious and interfaith functions to support and advance religious tolerance and inclusion. At these events, embassy officials spoke on acceptance, tolerance, and harmony in a multifaith cultural context.