

SURINAME 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; both the constitution and the penal code prohibit discrimination based on religion. Any violation may be brought before a court of justice. Religious groups seeking financial support from the government must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs. Limited government financial support for religious groups remained available through the Ministry of Home Affairs, primarily as a stipend for clergy. The government continued to pay wages for teachers of schools managed by religious organizations; however, according to the Federation of Religious Schools in Suriname (FIBOS), other subsidies designated to FIBOS for operational expenses of these schools were either late or not paid. FIBOS reported the government was also late in its payment of subsidies to children's and elderly homes run by religious organizations. The Department of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported interfaith week held annually in February.

The Inter-Religious Council (IRIS) – an organization encompassing two Hindu and two Muslim groups, the Jewish community, and the Catholic Church – continued to discuss interfaith activities and positions on government policies and their impact on society. IRIS collaborated with nonmember religious organizations on efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance.

In meetings with host government representatives, U.S. embassy officials continued to highlight U.S. government policy on the importance of protecting religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador hosted a roundtable event in June that focused on religious tolerance. Embassy officials met with members of the Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian communities to encourage tolerance and discuss promotion within their communities of respect for religious diversity. In an effort to better promote U.S. policy and messaging on religious freedom, the embassy distributed information on the Department of State Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom to religious organizations and government officials with responsibility for religious affairs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 604,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2012 census, the most recent available, approximately half of the population is Christian (26 percent Protestant, 22 percent Roman Catholic, 3

percent other Christian). Christian groups include Moravian, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, evangelical Protestant, Baptist, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Hindus are 22 percent of the population, including the Sanatan Dharm and the Arya Dewaker. Muslims, including Sunni and Ahmadi Muslims and the World Islamic Call Society, are 14 percent. The remaining 13 percent includes Baha’is, Jews, Buddhists, Brahma Kumaris, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and three Rastafarian organizations: the Aya Bingi Order, 12th Tribe, and Bobo Shanti.

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, descendants of Africans who fled Dutch colonial plantations, worship nature. Those of Amerindian and Maroon origin who identify as Christian often combine Christian practices with indigenous religious customs. Some Creoles in urban areas, as well as some Maroons, worship their ancestors through a rite called *wintie*.

There is some 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 to change their religion. Any violation of religious freedom may be brought before a court of justice.

The penal code provides punishment for those who instigate hate or discrimination against persons based on religion or creed in any way; however, the law has not been enforced. 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) (\$3,300). In cases where an 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 may include imprisonment of up to two years and fines of up to SRD 50,000 (\$6,600).

Religious groups must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs only if they seek financial support, including stipends for clergy, 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.

The law does not permit religious instruction in public schools. Private schools managed by religious groups include religious instruction in the curriculum. All students attending schools run by religious groups must take part in religious instruction, regardless of their religious background. Parents are not permitted to homeschool children for religious reasons.

The government funds salaries for all teachers in primary and junior secondary schools established and managed by various religious groups and provides a stipend that partially covers maintenance costs for these institutions. Religious groups must provide the remaining funding, which includes construction costs, funding for school furniture, supplies, and additional maintenance expenses. Religious organizations manage approximately 50 percent of primary (ages 4-12) and junior secondary (ages 12-16) schools in the country. Religious organizations do not manage higher secondary schools (ages 16-19). The Catholic diocese, Moravian Church, and Hindu community manage the majority of private schools. Through the Ministries of Education and Finance, the government provides a fee per registered child and pays teacher salaries to the religious organizations managing these schools.

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

Government Practices

According to FIBOS, the government continued to pay wages for teachers of schools managed by religious organizations; however, its other subsidies for operational expenses of these schools were either late or not paid. In September the government and FIBOS reached an agreement on payment of subsidies for attending students. Parties agreed the government would pay the school fees for the 2019-2020 school year. According to FIBOS, the government was also late in its payment of subsidies to children's and elderly homes run by religious organizations. FIBOS attributed these delays to the government's budget shortfall.

Government officials continued to raise the importance of religious freedom, respect for religious diversity, and its commitment to protecting religious minorities at the highest levels. President Desire Delano Bouterse underscored the country’s “rich diversity” in his September 30 budget speech, as well as the importance for different groups to uphold principles of “unity, peace, and tolerance” with each other.

All schools, including public schools, continued to recognize various religious holidays that are also national holidays, including Christmas, Easter, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, Diwali, and Phagwa. The government continued to prohibit prayer groups in public schools.

The armed forces continued to maintain a staff chaplaincy with Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic clergy available to military personnel.

Vice President Ashwin Adhin attended several religious events on behalf of the government throughout the year.

Minister of Home Affairs Mike Noersalim again issued statements on behalf of the government in honor of World Prayer Day in March and throughout the year ahead of different religious holidays such as Phagwa, Diwali, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Christmas. The statements emphasized the importance of religious harmony for a prosperous society. In the lead-up to Phagwa, Noersalim stated, “We are blessed in Suriname with a rich religious diversity, a wealth from which we can all draw, at any time. And we must cherish this social capital and make it flourish. If we want to leave a good world for our posterity, then we will have to see the sustainability of our religious diversity as a duty.”

The Department of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Home Affairs supported Interfaith Week held annually in February.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

IRIS members met monthly to discuss interfaith activities as well as the impact of different government policies on society. IRIS also collaborated with other nonmember religious organizations on efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance. In February several religious groups, including Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Baha’is, and Buddhists, organized an annual Interfaith Week throughout the country during which tolerance and dialogue were the main themes.

According to IRIS, the activities were in support of the UN's World Interfaith Harmony Week.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials continued to highlight U.S. government policy concerning the importance of protection of religious freedom in meetings with government officials.

In June the Ambassador hosted a religious roundtable event that focused on religious tolerance. Participants included a monsignor representing the Catholic Diocese of Paramaribo, the bishop of the Moravian Church, the head of the Lutheran Church, the chair of the Suriname Islamic Foundation, representatives from Arya Dewaker and Sanatan Dharm, a representative from the synagogue, and the deputy director for religious affairs of the Ministry of Home Affairs. In addition to religious freedom, participants also discussed the role religious organizations could play in addressing issues of national concern, including human trafficking, democracy, the 2020 parliamentary elections, and environmental issues.

In an effort to better promote U.S. policy and messaging on religious freedom, the embassy distributed information on the Department of State Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom to religious organizations and government officials with responsibility germane to religion.