

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religious belief and practice, including worship. It prohibits discrimination based on religion. Laws prohibit actions that incite religious hatred and violence. Prime Minister Keith Rowley issued public messages for Easter, Ramadan, and Diwali that underscored religious freedom, diversity, and unity. He also met with members of the Muslim community to assure them of their right to “protection and equal place” following the attacks on mosques in New Zealand. In December a law was implemented decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of marijuana and creating a licensing authority to permit the cultivation and sale of marijuana, including for religious uses. Prior to passage, some Muslim groups called for further evaluation of the impact of the legislation, while a Rastafarian umbrella group, All Mansions of Rastafari, said they supported it. During the year the National Muslim Women’s Organization of Trinidad and Tobago expressed its support for a 2018 High Court ruling in favor of allowing a Muslim special reserve police officer to wear a hijab while on duty.

The Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), an interfaith, nonprofit coordinating committee representing approximately 25 religious groups and receiving both private and public funding, continued to advocate for the importance of religious tolerance. During its annual general meeting, the IRO called for an interfaith effort by citizens to assist Venezuelan migrants.

U.S embassy officials engaged the government, including the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC), to inquire about concerns of religious freedom and tolerance for religious diversity. The Ambassador continued outreach with imams, and embassy officers met with Orishas and attended iftars and ecumenical religious services to promote religious diversity and freedom. In November the embassy hosted a roundtable with IRO members to discuss interfaith cooperation and religious tolerance among nonmember and member representatives of the IRO. The embassy also promoted religious freedom and tolerance through social media posts.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.2 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2011 local census, 26.5 percent of the population is Protestant, 21.6 percent of the population Roman Catholic, 18.2 percent Hindu, 5 percent Muslim, and 1.5 percent Jehovah's Witnesses. Traditional Caribbean religious groups with African roots include the Spiritual/Shouter Baptists, who represent 5.7 percent of the population, and the Orisha, who incorporate elements of West African spiritualism and Christianity, at 0.9 percent. The census also reports 2.2 percent of the population has no religious affiliation, 11.1 percent do not state a religious affiliation, and 7.5 percent list their affiliation as "other," which includes several small Christian groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as well as Baha'is, Rastafarians, Buddhists, and Jews.

The religious composition of the two islands is distinct. On Trinidad, which contains 95 percent of the country's population, those of African descent make up 32 percent of the population and are predominantly Christian. A small, primarily Sunni Muslim community is concentrated in and around Port of Spain, along the east-west corridor of northern Trinidad, and in certain areas of central and south Trinidad. Those of East Indian descent constitute 37 percent of the population, approximately half of whom are Hindu, in addition to Muslims, Presbyterians, and Catholics. The population of Tobago is 85 percent of African descent and predominantly Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religious belief and observance, including worship. It recognizes the existence of fundamental human rights and freedoms and prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The law prohibits acts of sedition and seditious intent, which includes engendering or promoting feelings of ill will towards, hostility to, or contempt for any class of inhabitants, including based on religion.

A fine of up to 1,000 Trinidad and Tobago dollars (TTD) (\$150) may be levied for expressions of hatred directed specifically against a person's religion, including any "riotous, violent, indecent, or disorderly behavior in any place of divine worship," or attacks, ridicule, or vilification of another person's religion in a manner likely to provoke a breach of the peace.

The law also prescribes a fine and imprisonment for two years for “any person who is convicted of any act or an attempt to commit blasphemy, writing and publishing, or printing and publishing, any blasphemous libel...”; however, the government does not enforce the law.

Judicial review, with the power of the court to modify or enforce orders, is available to those who state they are victims of religious discrimination. Claimants may also appeal a court’s decision.

Possession and use of small amounts of marijuana is legal, but the consumption of marijuana is illegal in public spaces.

Religious groups must register with the government to receive tax-exempt donations or gifts of land, perform marriages, or receive visas for foreign missionaries. To register, groups must demonstrate they are nonprofit organizations, be in operation for at least one year, and submit a request for charitable status to the Ministry of Finance. The request must include a certificate or articles of incorporation, the constitution and bylaws of the organization, and the most recently audited financial statements. Religious groups have the same rights and obligations as most legal entities, regardless of their registration status. They may, for example, own land and hire employees, and they are liable for property taxes and government-mandated employee benefits.

Chaplains representing different faiths present in the country may visit prisons to perform religious acts and minister to prisoners.

The EOC is established by law as an independent body comprised of five commissioners appointed by the president with advice from the prime minister and leader of the opposition. The EOC is charged with eliminating discrimination through investigating and resolving complaints through conciliation, as well as developing education programs.

The government permits religious instruction in public schools, allocating time each week during which any religious group may provide an instructor at the parent’s request for an adherent in the school. Attendance at these classes is voluntary, and the religious groups represented are diverse. The law states public schools may not refuse admission to individuals based on religious beliefs, and no child is required to attend any religious observance or receive instruction in religious subjects as a condition of admission or continued attendance in a public

school. Private schools, also called “assisted schools,” receive a combination of government and private funding.

The government subsidizes religiously affiliated public schools, including schools operated by Christian, Hindu, and Muslim groups. The government allots primary school funding on a per pupil basis, with the amount varying each year. For secondary schools, the government allots funding based on budget requests submitted by each school.

No child over two months of age is permitted to enter a nursery, pre-school, or primary school without first being immunized, or having started the immunization process. The law does not make an exception for religious beliefs.

Parents may enroll their children in religiously affiliated or other private schools, or in some cases homeschool them as an alternative to public education as long as a parent interested in homeschooling submits a letter of intent to the Ministry of Education, which determines if the parent is qualified.

Foreign missionaries must meet standard requirements for entry-visas and must represent a registered religious group in the country. Permits are valid for a maximum period of three years, at a cost of TTD 500 (\$75) per year. Missionaries may not remain longer than three years per visit but may re-enter after a year’s absence.

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

Government Practices

In response to a November 2018 High Court ruling allowing a female Special Reserve Police officer to wear a hijab while in uniform, the National Muslim Women’s Organization of Trinidad and Tobago said it was pleased with the ruling, adding that if female officers in other countries were allowed to wear their hijab to work, Trinidad and Tobago should not be any different. The High Court reversed a ruling that barred female Muslim police officers from wearing hijabs while on duty. Justice Margaret Mohammed struck down the longstanding rule against the headwear by law enforcement officers, stating that the intention of the framers of the constitution was for an “evolving plural society” where religious symbols were permitted. Mohammed listed those religious symbols as the cross, the rosary, raksha sutra, sindoor, and hijabs, all permitted in public spaces.

In December a law was implemented decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of marijuana and creating a licensing authority to permit the cultivation and sale of marijuana, primarily for medical purposes but also for religious or scientific uses. Prior to the law's passage, several Muslim organizations asked the government to conduct an independent analysis of the pros and cons of decriminalizing marijuana. Members of the Rastafarian community supported the law. Pro-marijuana activists criticized the legislation for not going far enough to legalize marijuana use and cultivation.

The new law removed criminal penalties for possession of up to 30 grams of marijuana. The law also provides a pathway for the expungement of prior marijuana convictions and allows individuals to cultivate plants for personal use. A companion law established a regulatory body to approve licenses for marijuana businesses.

Members of the government and officials from both political parties continued to participate in ceremonies and holidays of various religious groups and emphasized religious tolerance and harmony in their remarks. Prime Minister Keith Rowley issued public messages for Easter, Ramadan, and Diwali that underscored religious freedom, diversity, and unity. In his Diwali message, he said, "Trinidad and Tobago is one of the most successful multi-cultural, and most significantly multi-religious societies. In comparison, we can boast of our tolerance and respect for each other's beliefs, and ethnicity, but I believe we all need to go further, seeking a deeper understanding of those who occupy this geographical space." On March 20, Prime Minister Rowley met with the Muslim community following the attacks on mosques in New Zealand to assure them of their "right to protection and equal place."

The government continued to limit the number of long-term foreign missionaries to 35 per registered religious group. Missionaries in excess of the 35 individuals could remain in the country for a maximum of 30 days. IRO members continued to state the government equitably applied the law; however, some international religious groups continued to state more than 35 missionaries could remain in the country if they affiliated with more than one registered group, including nonprofit groups and charities. The IRO's former president, a Hindu, said the law continued to constrain Hindus, who had few missionaries but wanted them to stay longer than the three-year legal limit. According to the president of the IRO, religious institutions could apply to extend the stay of their missionaries, but there was no guarantee of approval.

According to the EOC, it received nine formal complaints of discrimination based on religion during the year, compared with 11 in 2018. Cases primarily involved Muslims not being allowed to wear the hijab in the workplace or to take time off from work to attend Friday prayer.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The IRO – an interfaith coordinating committee, with both private and government funding, representing approximately 25 religious groups, including numerous denominations within Christianity, as well as Islam, Hinduism, and the Orisha and Baha’i faiths – had a founding mandate “to speak to the nation on matters of social, moral, and spiritual concern,” and continued to advocate for matters of religious and social concern. At the annual general meeting of the IRO in June, IRO President Reverend Dr. Knolly Clarke called for interfaith action of citizens to assist Venezuelan migrants and not rely on the government to provide relief.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials engaged the government, including the EOC, regarding religious freedom and tolerance for religious diversity. In November the embassy hosted a roundtable with IRO members to discuss interfaith cooperation and religious tolerance among nonmember and member representatives of the IRO.

The Ambassador and embassy staff met regularly with Muslim religious and civil society leaders, including imams, for discussions on topics including religious tolerance and countering violent extremism related to religion. During the year, embassy officers met with Orishas and attended iftars and ecumenical religious services to promote religious diversity and freedom.

The embassy shared content on its social media platforms promoting religious freedom and tolerance, as well as posts highlighting places of worship and persons practicing their faith in commemoration of International Religious Freedom Day.