

SURINAME 2016 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 Ministry of Education reiterated government policy, which prohibits the practice or teaching of religion in public schools.

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 government consulted the IRIS on multiple occasions during the year on the social impact of planned austerity measures. The IRIS chairman said the council expressed support for freedom of religious practices and encouraged mutual respect among religious groups.

U.S. embassy officials met with government officials to hear their assessment of relations between different faith groups. U.S. embassy officials interacted with the Christian, Hindu, and Muslim communities, and exchanged information about religious freedom. The embassy hosted an interfaith luncheon on religious freedom in which participants discussed how the topic was perceived by the different groups, the relations between religious groups in the country, and the relationship religious groups have with the government.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 586,000 (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2012 census, the most recent available, 48 percent of the population is Christian, of which 22 percent is Roman Catholic. Other 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 (Mormons). Hindus are 22 percent of the population, including the Sanathan 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 Bahais, Jews, Buddhists, Brahma

Kumaris, 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 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*.

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 or change their religion. Any violation may be brought before a court of justice.

Religious groups are required to 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 may 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. Given recent financial problems, government support has been limited.

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) (\$3,340). 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 (\$6,680).

The law does not permit religious instruction in public schools. The government funds teacher salaries and provides a stipend that partially covers maintenance costs to elementary and secondary schools established and managed by various religious groups. Religious groups are required to provide the remaining funding, which includes construction costs, funding for school furniture, supplies, and additional maintenance expenses. Approximately 50 percent of primary and secondary schools in the country are managed by religious organizations. The Roman Catholic diocese, the Moravian Church, and the Hindu community manage the majority of private schools.

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

Government Practices

In May the Ministry of Education reiterated its policy banning prayer groups from meeting on school property. Schools celebrated various religious holidays, and some public schools allowed prayer groups during breaks. Some religious groups managed their own primary and secondary schools, which included religious instruction. Parents were not permitted to homeschool children for religious or other reasons.

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 organization of the country's different religious groups, included two Hindu groups, two Muslim groups, and the Catholic Church. Non-Catholic Christian groups are not members of the IRIS, but were consulted on important matters. 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 government consulted the IRIS on multiple occasions during the year regarding the social impact of planned austerity measures. The IRIS chairman said the council

expressed support for freedom of religious practice and encouraged mutual respect among religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with government officials to hear their assessment of relations between different faith groups. They interacted with the Muslim, Hindu, and Christian communities, and exchanged information about religious freedom. The Embassy hosted an interfaith luncheon in February on religious freedom. The participants discussed how the different groups perceived religious freedom and explored the relations between religious groups in the country.