

BELIZE 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom to express one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. By law, the Council of Churches and the Belize Association of Evangelical Churches (BAEC) together appoint a "church senator" to the Senate, with the concurrence of the governor general. The church senator provides advice on how public policy affects the political positions of religious groups. Nondenominational "spirituality" classes, including morals, values, and world religions, are taught in public schools; opt outs are possible. The government continued to engage religious groups on its stated commitment to fostering tolerance for religious minorities, protecting religious freedom, and ensuring equal protection under the law. The government continued to permit religious leaders from varying denominations to visit the government-owned and -financed central prison to hold services at its nondenominational chapel.

Religious groups continued collaboration with international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to carry out missionary work in the country. The interfaith Belize Chaplain Service (BCS) continued to promote several initiatives, including counseling services for relatives of crime victims and for police officers, with the stated objective to provide professional, multifaith, compassionate pastoral care to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of the public. The BCS supported the government's decision to submit the border dispute with Guatemala to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) based on council members' religious belief in social justice.

U.S. embassy officials, including the Charge d'Affaires, met with government officials to emphasize the importance of continued government engagement with a wide spectrum of religious groups, including Christians and non-Christian religious minorities. The embassy invited representatives of religious groups, including religious minorities, to participate in embassy programs and outreach to reinforce the role of religious groups in promoting respect for religious diversity and tolerance and in addressing crime.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 393,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2010 census, members of the Roman Catholic Church are the largest religious group, accounting for 40 percent of the population. Protestants make up 32 percent, including Pentecostals (8 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (5 percent), Anglicans (5 percent), Mennonites (4 percent), Baptists (4 percent), Methodists (3 percent), and the Church of the Nazarene (3 percent). Jehovah's Witnesses make up 2 percent of the population, while other religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Rastafarians, the Salvation Army, and Baha'is, together constitute 11 percent. Approximately 15 percent of the population does not affiliate with one of these listed religious organizations.

No religious group is a majority in any of the country's six districts. Catholics reside throughout the country. Mennonites and Pentecostals reside mostly in the rural areas of the Cayo and Orange Walk Districts.

The country is also home to smaller religious communities. Soka Gakkai International-Belize (a Buddhist association) has a temple in Belize City, but there are no precise figures on its membership. The 2010 census lists 577 Muslims in the country; this number does not include the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat group, which according to its leaders, numbers fewer than 160 individuals. Indigenous groups, including the Maya and the Garifuna, also practice traditional folk religious rituals.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, freedom to change religion or belief, and freedom – either alone or in community with others – to manifest and propagate one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. It states that no one may be compelled to take an oath contrary to one's religion or belief. The constitution stipulates that religious groups may establish places of education and states that “no such community shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for persons of that community.” Discrimination on religious grounds is illegal.

The preamble to the constitution acknowledges “the supremacy of God.”

An unenforced law limits speech that is “blasphemous or indecent.”

By law, the Council of Churches, a board including representatives from several major Christian denominations, and the BAEC together appoint one individual, called the “church senator,” to the Senate with the governor general’s concurrence. The two groups together include the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches, Salvation Army, Chinese Christian Mission, Church of Christ, Assembly of God Church, Seventh-day Adventists, and other evangelical Protestant groups. They do not include the National Evangelical Association of Belize), which separated from the BAEC in 2015 due to political differences, or any non-Christian denominations.

By law, the church senator provides advice on public policy affecting the political positions of religious groups. This senatorial seat places the political interests of religious leaders on par with the three other senators appointed to represent labor unions, the business community, and the NGO community. The Senate is the upper chamber of the country’s two-part National Assembly; members of the House of Representatives run for election, while senators are appointed.

The law requires all religious groups to register with the official Companies Registry in the Ministry of the Attorney General in a process similar to that of a business. Registration permits the religious organization to operate legally in the country; receive state recognition; negotiate, sue, and be sued; own property; hire employees; and lend or borrow money. There is a one-time registration fee of 295 Belize dollars (\$150) and a yearly fee of five Belize dollars (\$3). Requirements for registration include a memorandum of association with the government delineating the group’s objective and mission, an article of association, and a letter from the central bank if the organization has foreign financial contributors. The government may shut down the facilities of groups that fail to register.

The government does not levy property taxes on churches and other places of worship. Other church-owned buildings occupied on a regular basis, such as clergy residences, are not tax-exempt. Religious organizations may also partner with the state to operate schools, hospitals, and other charity organizations and, depending on funding availability, receive financial assistance from the government.

The public school curriculum includes weekly nondenominational “spirituality” classes incorporating morals and values. Government-aided church-run schools may teach lessons on world religions for students from kindergarten through eighth grade as part of their social studies curriculum. These church-run schools also

offer separate religious education classes that are specific to their own faith. While there is no official rule governing a student's ability to opt out of either of these sessions, parents may decide their children will not attend. The constitution prohibits any educational institution from obligating a child to attend any religious ceremonies or observances. Due to insufficient government funds, Christian churches manage most public elementary schools, high schools, and some colleges. Schools routinely observe Catholic and other Christian holidays at the schools' discretion. Non-Christian religious groups run a few schools, such as the Muslim Community Primary School in Belize City. All schools, public and private, must adhere to government regulations; the Ministry of Education monitors their compliance.

The law grants respect for inmates' religious beliefs, and inmates may participate in religious activities in prison. Religious leaders may request use of the chapel inside the facility and offer religious services to inmates. Prison authorities avoid requiring unnecessary work by prisoners on Sunday and other major Christian religious holidays (Christmas and Good Friday) and by prisoners recorded as belonging to other religions on their recognized day of religious observance. The law allows the provision of religious scriptures and other books of religious observance to prisoners.

To enter the country and proselytize, foreign religious workers need a multi-entry visa, which costs 100 Belize dollars (\$50) and is valid for one year. Applicants must also purchase a religious worker's permit, costing 50 Belize dollars (\$25). The visas are renewable on an annual basis. Visa requirements include information on intended length of stay, location, funding for activity, and specific purpose. Members of all religious groups are eligible to obtain visas. While a group does not need to be locally registered, recommendation by a locally registered religious group lends more credibility to the visa request, according to local authorities.

The Belize Defense Force retains a nondenominational chaplain and space for religious observance. With the prior consent of authorities, any religious group may use the space for worship.

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

Government Practices

The government continued to engage religious groups in discussions to foster tolerance for religious minorities, protect religious freedom, and ensure equal protection under the law.

The government held discussions with the Council of Churches, Church Senator Ashley Rocke, who is a Baptist pastor, and several other religious leaders to keep them abreast of government plans of interest to them, including the education budget. According to the head of the Council of Churches, while by law the church senator represents all religions, there was little response from non-Christian religious groups to the church senator's efforts to seek their political perspectives.

The government continued to permit religious leaders from varying denominations to visit the government-owned and -financed central prison to hold services at the prison's nondenominational chapel. A representative of the Kolbe Foundation, the Catholic organization running the prison, said prison officials continued to respect dietary restrictions for prisoners of diverse religious backgrounds. Several religious groups, including Anglicans, Methodists, Catholics, evangelical Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, Nazarenes, Mennonites, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Baptists, and the Church of Jesus Christ, continued to make frequent use of the access to clergy granted by the prison administration.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Local religious groups, especially from evangelical Protestant denominations, continued to cooperate with international NGOs and religious partners from the United States and Canada to carry out missionary work in the country. They held joint conferences and outreach activities to address health, poverty, and education issues.

Thirteen registered religious-based radio stations continued to operate in the country. According to the Belize Broadcasting Authority, evangelical Protestant groups continued to own and operate most of the stations. Other stations included one Catholic, two Mennonite, and one Pentecostal radio station.

The interfaith BCS, which includes representatives from the Methodist, Catholic, Anglican, Salvation Army, Chinese Christian Mission, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal Churches, as well as Muslim and Baha'i leaders, continued to promote counseling services for relatives of crime victims, with the stated objective to provide professional, multifaith, compassionate pastoral care to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of the public. The BCS continued to offer services to the

central prison and to the Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital staff, patients, and relatives. The BCS ran the chapel at the hospital, offering weekly Sunday services and Islamic prayers on Fridays. In February the BCS advised the national electorate to support submitting the Belize-Guatemala territorial dispute to the ICJ for resolution. In its press release, the council supported the ICJ submission based on its members' religious beliefs that it was "a matter of social justice in fostering a peaceful resolution to the territorial dispute at hand."

The Council of Churches invited representatives from minority religious groups, including Buddhists, Hindus, Ahmadi Muslims, and Baha'is to participate in discussions about joint community projects.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d' Affaires met with government officials to emphasize the importance of continuing to engage with a wide spectrum of religious groups in the country, including with Christians and non-Christian religious minorities. Minority religious groups that embassy officials discussed with the government included Buddhists of Chinese and Southwest Asian origins, Hindus of Indian origin, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, and other small religious groups, including the Garifuna Afro-indigenous religions and Mayan folk religionists. The embassy invited representatives of religious groups, including Bishop Philip Wright, Bishop Lawrence Nicassio, and representatives of religious minorities to participate in embassy programs and outreach to reinforce the role of religious groups in promoting respect for religious diversity and tolerance, including combating violent extremism, and in addressing crime.