

# **GUYANA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship, including the right to choose and change one's religion. The government recognized the first church for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community – The Open and Affirming Church. Representatives of the Rastafarian community continued to state a law criminalizing the possession of 15 grams or more of marijuana infringed on their religious practices. In December, the cabinet approved a decision to amend the law to remove custodial sentencing for small amounts of marijuana. According to interfaith leaders, the government continued to promote religious tolerance and diversity, including through public messaging on religious holidays. The government did not hold interfaith activities because of COVID-19 precautions and restrictions and what local and international press described as a volatile five-month period from the March 2 national election until a winner was declared on August 2.

On March 1, the interfaith Universal Peace Federation – Guyana hosted a ceremony to encourage all persons to promote peace and refrain from violence during the national election. The Inter-Religious Organization of Guyana (IRO), whose members include representatives of the Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Rastafarian, and Baha'i faiths, continued to conduct interfaith efforts, and its constituent religious groups made oral pledges to promote social cohesion and respect religious diversity.

In October and December, the Ambassador spoke with the Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sports regarding the importance of keeping the country's multireligious and multiethnic society strong despite tensions occurring during the five-month electoral impasse. The two also spoke about engaging all religious groups in public observances of national religious holidays to further strengthen the country's existing commitments to religious freedom, diversity, and tolerance. U.S. embassy officials promoted social cohesion and religious tolerance, meeting with representatives of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups and discussing issues related to religious tolerance. Embassy officials amplified these messages through discussions about religious tolerance on social media.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 750,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2012 census, 64 percent of the population is Christian, 25 percent Hindu, and 7 percent Muslim (mainly Sunni). Less than 1 percent belongs to other religious groups, which include Rastafarians, Baha'is, Afro-descendent Faithists, and Areruya, an indigenous faith system. An estimated 3 percent of the population does not profess a religious affiliation. Among Christians, Pentecostals comprise 23 percent of the population; Roman Catholics, 7 percent; Anglicans, 5 percent; Seventh-day Adventists, 5 percent; Methodists, 1 percent; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, less than 1 percent, and other Christians, 21 percent, which includes those belonging to the Assembly of God Church, Church of Christ, and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, among others.

The membership of most religious groups includes a cross section of ethnic groups, although nearly all Hindus are of South Asian 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 prescribes a prison term of one year for a blasphemous libel conviction; however, the law exempts religious expression made in "good faith and decent language."

There is no official system for formal registration of a religious group, but to receive government recognition, all places of worship must register 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 nonprofit organizations, allowing 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 Home Affairs. Religious groups seeking to enter an indigenous village for the purpose of proselytizing must apply for and obtain permission from the village council. Application to a village council must include the name of the group, the names of its members who will be going to the village, their purpose, and estimated date of arrival.

There is no religious education in public schools, regardless of whether the school is religiously affiliated. Most public schools' religious affiliations are Anglican or Methodist. There are both public and private religiously affiliated schools. Private schools are operated entirely by private groups and are not funded by the state. All students attending private religious schools must participate in religious education, regardless of a student's religious beliefs.

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

### **Government Practices**

According to media reports, in January, the government recognized the Open and Affirming Church, associated with the United Anglo-Catholic Church in the United States and established by an LGBT group in October 2019. The Church stated it provided an inclusive environment for LGBT persons, whom it said encountered homophobic attitudes at other places of worship.

Representatives of the Rastafarian community continued to state a law criminalizing the possession of 15 grams or more of marijuana infringed on their religious practices. The Guyana Rastafari Council continued to petition the government to legalize the use of small amounts of marijuana for religious purposes. In September, at an interfaith roundtable, a representative of the council said the group would be advocating with the newly installed government to decriminalize marijuana possession for religious purposes. The council also asked for international support to lobby the government. In December, the cabinet approved a decision to amend the law to remove custodial sentencing for small amounts of marijuana. It also said it was deliberating on the quantity that would not mandate custodial sentencing.

The government continued to maintain regulations limiting 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, the government and religious groups whose membership included foreign missionaries continued to state the government did not apply the visa limitation rule. Religious groups also said the visa quotas the government allotted to them were sufficient and did not adversely affect their activities.

The government continued to promote interfaith harmony and respect for diversity through its public messaging. It did not hold interfaith activities because of

COVID-19 precautions and restrictions, and what local and international press described as a volatile five-month period from the March 2 national election until a winner was declared on August 2. In March, then-President David Granger encouraged “togetherness regardless of religion” on the occasion of the Hindu festival of Holi, known locally as Phagwah.

In December, Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sports Charles Ramson said he was focused on ensuring public observances of national holidays were religiously diverse, and having members of different religious groups participate actively in national celebrations. He also said he was committed to holding a dialogue with all religious organizations to better understand their needs and concerns.

Government representatives continued to meet with leaders of various religious groups to promote social cohesion and discuss tolerance of diversity, including Muslim, Hindu, and Christian groups. Government officials also participated regularly in the observance of Christian, Hindu, and Islamic religious holidays throughout the year. The government continued to declare some holy days of the country’s three major religious groups, including Eid al-Adha, Holi, Easter, and Diwali, as national holidays.

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

The IRO, whose membership includes approximately 40 religious bodies and organizations, continued to lead interfaith efforts, and its constituent religious groups made oral pledges to promote social cohesion and respect religious diversity. On March 1, the Universal Peace Federation – Guyana, whose membership includes representatives from Christian, Hindu, and Islamic groups, hosted an interfaith ceremony to encourage all persons to promote peace and refrain from violence during the March 2 national election. Several IRO member groups also participated in the march. Christian, Muslim, and Hindu groups expressed similar sentiments during Holi celebrations in March.

In September, during a roundtable discussion, IRO participants, including representatives of Baha’i, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups, stated their religious groups did not discriminate against members of the LGBT community but did not condone the open practice of their lifestyle. Some members of IRO said they declined to openly partner with the Open and Affirming Church, which is specifically identified with LGBT persons.

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

In October, the Ambassador spoke with Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sports Ramson regarding social cohesion and the importance of keeping the country's multireligious and multiethnic society strong, despite tensions occurring during the five-month electoral impasse. In December, the Ambassador met with the Minister to discuss his efforts to ensure public observances of national holidays were religiously diverse and to have members of different religious groups actively participate in national celebrations. The Ambassador also discussed with the Minister the latter's commitment to having a dialogue with all religious organizations to better understand their needs.

In September, embassy officials organized a roundtable that included representatives of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups, in which they discussed issues related to religious tolerance, fostering cohesion and respect for religious differences, and the challenges for worship during the COVID-19 pandemic. In February and May, embassy officials engaged with religious leaders on the government's Ethnic Relations Commission to discuss ways to promote harmony prior to the March national election. The embassy amplified these activities through discussions on social media about religious tolerance, conveying messages that emphasized the importance of religious tolerance in the country's pluralistic society.