

SURINAME 2020 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 and support staff of schools managed by religious organizations, as well as subsidies to cover operational costs and school supplies. Religious organizations continued to report that the government was late in its payment of subsidies to children's and elderly homes run by religious organizations. In July, during swearing-in ceremonies for the new national assembly and the government, clergy representing different religious groups took part in the swearing-in of members of their respective congregations.

The Interreligious Council (IRIS) – an organization encompassing two Hindu and two Muslim groups, the Jewish community, and the Roman Catholic Church – continued to discuss interfaith activities and positions on government policies and their impact on society. IRIS collaborated with nonmember religious organizations, such as the Committee of Christian Churches in Suriname, which comprises the Roman Catholic Church, the Moravian Church, the Lutheran Church, as well as the Protestant Church, 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 embassy hosted a human rights film festival in February and March that included the public viewing of a film on religious freedom and a discussion on religious tolerance and diversity.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 610,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2012 census, the most recent available, approximately half of the population is Christian (26 percent Protestant, 22 percent Catholic, and 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. Persons 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 was not 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) (\$1,700). 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 (\$3,500).

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 and support staff in primary and junior secondary schools established and managed by various religious groups. Additionally, the schools receive a subsidy for their operational costs based on the number of students. The government also provides 90 percent of funding for books and other materials. 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

Different religious organizations, including the Sanatan Dhram, the Suriname Islamic Association, Arya Dewaker, and the Moravian Church, reported delays in the government's payment of subsidies to children's and elderly homes managed by these organizations. According to the government, the delays were due to shortfalls in the government's budget. The government, through the Ministry of Education, agreed to continue its subsidies in two tranches to schools managed by religious organizations for the 2020-21 school year at the same level as the 2019-20 school year.

Government officials at the highest levels continued to raise the importance of religious freedom, respect for religious diversity, and their commitment to

protecting religious minorities. President Chandrikapersad Santokhi noted the country's cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity in his July 16 inaugural speech. He also discussed the importance of policies that promote respect for each individual group as well as harmony among groups.

Schools, including public schools, generally recognized various religious holidays that were also national holidays, including Christmas, Easter, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, Diwali, and Holi. None of these celebrations took place during the year due to precautionary measures implemented to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. 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.

While public celebrations of different religious holidays did not occur due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government continued to make statements throughout the year in support of religious harmony and inclusion ahead of various religious holidays. For example, in July, before Eid al-Adha, Home Affairs Minister Bronto Somohardjo noted in his remarks that the country's religious diversity was its greatest power because, "In that diversity, solutions are found and devised for problems that arise on the journey to a full-fledged and prosperous Surinamese nation." In his Christmas message, the Minister stated that citizens "draw power and wisdom" from the Christmas atmosphere to create a better country, adding, "Darkness makes place for light, sorrow for joy and happiness, and fear makes place for joy and happiness. In a society with a diversity of religions, this is an important condition: to live together in harmony."

In July, during swearing-in ceremonies for the new government that included the President and Vice President, their new cabinet, and the national assembly, clergy of different religious groups, including Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Moravian, Evangelical Christian, as well as an indigenous piaman and a wintie priest, participated in the ceremonies to mark the occasion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Members of IRIS continued to meet to discuss interfaith activities as well as the impact of different government policies on society. IRIS collaborated with nonmember religious organizations, such as the Committee of Christian Churches in Suriname, which comprises the Roman Catholic Church, the Moravian Church,

the Lutheran Church, as well as the Protestant Church, on efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials continued to highlight U.S. government policy on the importance of protection of religious freedom in meetings with government officials. The Ambassador made note of religious freedom in September during her meeting with the new Minister of Home Affairs, who is responsible for the government's enforcement of religious freedom.

In February and March, the embassy hosted a human rights film festival during which religious freedom was highlighted. The festival included a public viewing of a film that explored themes of religious tolerance with an introduction by a speaker who discussed religious tolerance and appreciation and respect for religious diversity. The speaker was a former participant in a U.S. government exchange program focusing on religious freedom.