

# **BELIZE 2021 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. In January and October, the National Evangelical Association of Belize (NEAB) expressed dissatisfaction with the government's proposal to legalize marijuana, noting it found "this shockingly offensive that in a national pandemic crisis" the new administration would put forward this issue in its first 100 days. In a public statement in July, the Belize Council of Churches (BCC) raised concerns about the "integrity and strength" of the relationship between the churches and the government after Prime Minister John Briceno placed responsibility on the churches for reductions in teachers' salaries, and for a perceived lack of proper consultation on the legalization of marijuana. According to the BCC, the government did not fully consider its concerns regarding COVID-19 restrictions for the reopening of churches for in-person worship, and it felt it irrelevant the government had used the same policy approach for churches and businesses. Methodist Bishop Alvin Moses Benguche served as the church senator representing all religious groups in the National Assembly.

Religious groups continued collaboration with international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to support nationwide missionary work, curtailed due to ongoing COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The interfaith Belize Chaplain Service (BCS), under its stated objective to provide multifaith pastoral care to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of the public, carried out outreach, especially to those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

U.S. embassy officials, including the Charge d'Affaires, continued to reiterate the importance of religious tolerance in meetings with government officials, including the Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and opposition representatives, and encouraged the government's engagement with a wide spectrum of religious groups. The Charge d'Affaires met with Senator Benguche, Anglican Bishop Philip Wright, and Catholic Bishop Lawrence Nicasio to discuss the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on churches. The embassy used social media to highlight the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 406,000 (midyear 2021). According to the 2010 census, the most recent, the Roman Catholic Church is 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), the Church of the Nazarene (3 percent), and the Salvation Army. Jehovah's Witnesses make up 2 percent of the population, while other religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Rastafarians, Baha'is, and Soka Gakkai together constitute 11 percent. Approximately 15 percent of the population does not affiliate with one of these 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 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. Some members of indigenous groups, including the Maya and the Garifuna, practice traditional folk religious rituals.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The preamble to the constitution acknowledges "the supremacy of God." 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. It also provides for freedom, either alone or in community with others, to manifest and propagate one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. It states that no one may be compelled to take an oath contrary to one's religion or belief. The constitution also stipulates 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." A rarely enforced law limits speech that is deemed "blasphemous or indecent."

By law, the BCC, a board that includes representatives from several major Christian denominations, and the Belize Association of Evangelical Churches (BAEC) alternate in appointing the church senator to the Senate, with the Governor

General's concurrence. The BCC includes the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches, as well as the Salvation Army, the Chinese Christian Mission, Seventh-day Adventists, and the Young Women's Christian Association. The BAEC includes evangelical Protestant groups, the Church of Christ, and the Assembly of God Church, but it excludes the NEAB, which separated in 2015 due to political differences. The church senator also represents non-Christian groups, which participate in the church senator's activities but have chosen not to play a role in the senator's appointment.

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 three other senators, who are appointed to represent labor unions, the business community, and the NGO community, respectively. 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 the same way a business would register. Registration allows a 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 (\$2.50). 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 do not 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 charitable 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-supported church-run schools may teach lessons on world religions for students from kindergarten through high school as part of social studies curricula. 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 classes, parents may decide their children will not attend. The constitution prohibits any educational institution from obligating a child to attend any religious ceremony or observance.

Due to insufficient government funds and pre-independence agreements, Christian churches manage most public elementary schools, high schools, and some colleges. Churches comanage, along with the government, approximately 60 percent of primary schools, 40 percent of high schools, and 50 percent of colleges. Churches that comanage educational institutions include the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist, Nazarene, Salvation Army, evangelical Protestant, Presbyterian, Muslim, Pentecostal, and Mennonite Churches. Schools routinely observe Christian and other religious 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 incorporate the national education curriculum and adhere to government regulations under the monitoring of the Ministry of Education.

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. The law prohibits prison authorities from requiring unnecessary work by prisoners on Sunday and other major Christian holidays (Christmas and Good Friday) and by prisoners recorded as belonging to other religions on their recognized days of religious observance. The law allows the provision of religious scriptures and other books of religious observance to prisoners. Authorities allow inmates to communicate with religious officiants via mail.

To enter the country and proselytize, foreign religious workers require 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 information questions include an applicant's intended length of stay, location of service, funding availability 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, a 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**

In January, the NEAB expressed disappointment about the government's proposal to legalize marijuana, stating the government had disregarded moral boundaries for "mere economic benefit." The NEAB said it found it to be "shockingly offensive that in a national pandemic crisis" the new administration would put forward this proposal in its first 100 days. The NEAB urged the government to "exercise intelligence and creativity" in finding other beneficial industries for the country. On July 2, the government introduced a bill to amend the Misuse of Drugs Act, which would authorize the legalization of marijuana. The bill sought to establish a provision for the licensing and registration of enterprises operating in the cannabis industry that would allow persons to cultivate, process, distribute, and deliver cannabis for adult use. In October, the NEAB stated it was "deeply concerned" that government involvement in the marijuana business meant the official promotion of marijuana use and development. NEAB officials said they had been voicing their concerns to the Minister of Home Affairs and New Growth Industries Kareem Musa but were still waiting for a formal meeting. The BCC also expressed concern that the government did not "seek and consider input on important moral and societal issues."

The BCC said that legalizing the cultivation and distribution of marijuana would encourage widespread use of the drug, causing effects on the human body, particularly young people, and was "not a path civil society should choose to take." In response, Minister Musa said the bill was intended to regulate an already existing industry and, after meeting with the BCC, he said that requirements in the law would prevent the easy accessibility of marijuana to minors. At year's end, the bill remained pending before parliament.

In July, the BCC expressed "major concern" that actions of the government "further eroded and undermined the Church's faith" in the existing church-state relationship. The BCC pointed to a statement Prime Minister Briceno made in July blaming the leadership of religious schools for a 10 percent reduction in teachers' salaries that the government had instituted in June as part of its economic recovery measures. The BCC stated that while it supported the government on salary

reduction under the belief that it was for the greater good, assigning blame to the leadership of religious schools was “grossly unfair.” The arrangement between the government and religious groups called for the government to provide 100 percent of salaries for primary school teachers and 70 percent for high school teachers. On a monthly basis, the government made disbursements to religious school officials, who in turn made payments to teachers. In November, the BCC stated that both government and church officials had taken steps to improve the relationship.

Throughout the year, the government held discussions with the BCC, church Senator Benguche, and several other religious leaders on plans regarding new legislation and amendments to existing legislation, as well as COVID-19 pandemic matters. According to the head of the Council of Churches, non-Christian religious groups had not engaged him on communicating their political perspectives, although by law the church senator represents all religious groups. In a July statement, the BCC said that government consultations should not be an “information-sharing exercise, but rather an open dialogue reminiscent of their past relationship.” According to the BCC, the government had not fully taken into account its concerns regarding COVID-19 restrictions on the reopening of churches to in-person worship, and it felt it unsuitable that the government had treated churches in the same manner as businesses. The BCC leadership said discussions with the government on the safest ways to reopen churches had been underway when the government announced in December public health protocol guidelines including adhering to curfews, wearing a mask, or other face covering and social distancing. The BCC also raised with the government what it said was the need for more counselors at the primary and secondary school levels, especially in the context of various difficulties introduced by the pandemic.

In October, the government passed a law rescinding the post of director of health services and, in its stead, created two positions of director of hospital services and principal health inspector. Senator Benguche said church leaders were concerned the government had amended existing legislation to eliminate the position of director of health services and in doing so had bypassed important civil servant protections codified in law. According to Benguche, this was viewed as a violation of the labor rights of the incumbent, Director of Health Services Dr. Marvin Manzanero. Benguche said the religious community was supportive of Dr. Manzanero because of his key leadership role during the COVID-19 pandemic and the professional relationship that it had established with him. While the BCC said it differed from the government’s policies on several issues, it commended the working relationship it had developed with Minister of Education Francis Fonseca and noted that under his leadership, there had been “tremendous improvement” in

the comanagement of schools and the composition of church representation on school boards.

Due to COVID-19 restrictive measures, prison authorities suspended religious services and activities for most of the year, but sources stated that corrections officers encouraged private religious observance. Officials from the Catholic Kolbe Foundation stated the organization trained inmate facilitators to lead small group services and that the prison radio station broadcast religious messages to inmates. Authorities allowed inmates to communicate with religious officiants via mail.

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

The interfaith BCS, which includes representatives from the Methodist, Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal Churches, the Salvation Army, and the Chinese Christian Mission, as well as Muslim and Baha'i leaders, held limited counseling services for relatives of crime victims, as permitted under health regulations. COVID-19 pandemic assembly restrictions significantly curtailed BCS services to the central prison and to Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital staff, patients, and relatives, along with BCS weekly Sunday services and Islamic prayers on Fridays at hospital chapels. During the year, the BCS organized food drives and distributed meals to the needy.

Fifteen registered religious-based radio stations operated in the country. According to the Belize Broadcasting Authority, evangelical Protestant groups continued to own and operate most of the stations. Others included Catholic, Mennonite, and Pentecostal radio stations.

The Kolbe Foundation continued to manage the country's central prison, with a focus on rehabilitating inmates. It provided support for all religious denominations within the inmate population, subject to the availability of a suitable chaplain. According to the BCC, the Kolbe Foundation continued to respect dietary restrictions for prisoners of diverse religious backgrounds. During the year, the Jehovah's Witnesses sent letters of encouragement to each inmate, along with a copy of *Watch Tower* magazine.

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

U.S. embassy officials, including the Charge d' Affaires, continued to reiterate the importance of religious tolerance in meetings with government officials, including

the Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and opposition representatives. In March, the Charge d'Affaires met with government officials to emphasize the importance of the government continuing to engage with a wide spectrum of religious groups in the country, including Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Baha'is, the Garifuna Afro-indigenous religions, and Mayan folk religionists. The Charge d'Affaires also met with Senator Benguche, Anglican Bishop Wright, and Catholic Bishop Nicasio to discuss the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on churches.

The embassy used social media, including Facebook and Twitter, to highlight the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity. Messages underscored the protection of human rights, including the freedom to worship safely.