

# **TIMOR-LESTE 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship, and of religious instruction. Religious organizations may register with the government under the regulations provided for nonprofit corporate bodies. Religious groups continued to report incidents in which civil servants rejected marriage or birth certificates issued by religious organizations other than the Catholic Church. Per the concordat with the Holy See, the government allocated annual funds to the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Timor-Leste. Non-Catholic groups reported tensions regarding unequal funding.

In contrast with 2016, Catholic, Protestant, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Muslim community leaders told embassy representatives they were not aware of threats or damage to their property.

The U.S. embassy engaged regularly with government officials on religious freedom. In December two officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation participated in a workshop, sponsored by the United States and Singapore, focused on the role of religion in peace-building efforts.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2015 census, 97.6 percent of the population is Catholic, 1.96 percent Protestant, and less than 1 percent Muslim. Protestant denominations include the Assemblies of God, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Christian Vision Church. There are also several small nondenominational Protestant congregations. Many citizens also retain animistic beliefs and practices along with their monotheistic religious affiliation.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship and specifies "religious denominations are separated from the State." It also prohibits

discrimination on the basis of religious beliefs and guarantees both the right to conscientious objection and freedom to teach any religion. The constitution protects freedom of religion in the event of a declaration of a state of siege or state of emergency.

There is no official state religion; however, the constitution commends the Catholic Church for its participation in the country's liberation efforts. A concordat between the government and the Holy See establishes a legal framework for cooperation, grants the Catholic Church autonomy in establishing and running schools, provides tax benefits, safeguards the Church's historical and cultural heritage, and acknowledges the right of its foreign missionaries to serve in the country.

Religious organizations that simply conduct religious services do not need to register with the government and can obtain tax-exempt status from the Ministry of Finance. Religious organizations seeking to open private schools or provide other community services must submit articles of association and other relevant documentation to register as nonprofit corporate bodies through the Ministry of Justice's National Directorate for Registry and Notary Services (DNRN). The law requires a separate registration with the Ministry of Interior for associations with primarily foreign members, including religious organizations, which must submit their articles of incorporation, proof they have the means to carry out their activities, and the name of a designated representative. In order to receive a tax identification number, organizations must register first with the Ministry of Justice and then bring that registration to the Service for Registration and Verification of Businesses, the business registration agency. The DNRN then issues a certificate and legally charters the organization.

The Ministry of Education classifies religious study as an optional elective subject in public schools. Most schools in the country are public, although the Catholic Church also operates its own private schools.

The law states "foreigners cannot provide religious assistance to the defense and security forces, except in cases of absolute need and urgency." Foreign citizen missionaries and other religious figures are exempt from paying normal residence and visa fees. Visa regulations are the same for all foreign religious workers, regardless of religious affiliation.

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

## Government Practices

Religious leaders continued to report incidents of individual public servants refusing service to religious minority members, such as instances where notaries refused to accept marriage certificates from religious minorities. The leaders stated that this was on an ad hoc, rather than systematic, basis and authorities resolved the incidents by addressing them with the notarial office director. In June religious minority leaders raised concerns with then-Prime Minister Rui Maria de Araujo and President Francisco Guterres Lu Olo over the civil code law that regulates only the legal procedure for Catholic marriages. Following the meeting, Araujo sent a letter to the Ministry of Justice regarding the Notary Service. President Lu Olo said he would work together with the national parliament to amend the civil code.

Religious minority leaders reported the government continued to reject marriage and birth certificates from religious organizations other than the Catholic Church as supporting documentation for registering for schools and other official acts. Registrations of births and marriages with the government continued to be an option, but civil registration rates remained relatively low, in comparison with registration for religious certificates.

The government provided a budget allocation to the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Timor-Leste, in comparison with previous years, when the government transferred funds to each of the country's three Catholic dioceses. The terms of the concordat with the Holy See governed the allocations. The direct budget allocations to the Catholic Church again caused some tension with non-Catholic religious organizations, according to minority religious leaders. All religious organizations could apply, along with other organizations, for government funding set aside for civil society organizations during the year. According to an official in the prime minister's office, the fund supported 71 projects, including the renovation of an orphanage by a Muslim organization, the construction of a Protestant church, and the restoration of a Hindu temple.

Police cadets continued to receive training in equal enforcement of the law and preventing discrimination, including discrimination based on religion.

Leaders from religious minorities met with the prime minister and president. An interreligious forum previously coordinated by the government did not meet during the year.

Several Catholic holidays were also national holidays, and Catholic religious leaders regularly presided over government ceremonies.

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

Leaders of the Catholic Church and long-standing Protestant and Muslim communities again reported good cooperation and relationships among religious groups, but they said some of the newly arrived groups could encounter problems when proselytizing if they did not respect local culture.

In contrast with 2016, representatives from Muslim, Protestant, and Jehovah's Witnesses said there were no reported threats or damages to their religious property during the year.

Many religious organizations, including the Catholic Church and minority religious groups, received significant funding from foreign donors.

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

Embassy officials underlined the importance of respecting religious freedom in interactions with government officials. In December two officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation took part in a U.S.-Singapore workshop on the role of religion in peacebuilding. The U.S. embassy highlighted Timor-Leste's participation in the workshop on its Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Embassy representatives met with Catholic, Protestant, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Muslim community leaders concerning the status of religious tolerance in society.