

# PANAMA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution, laws, and executive decrees provide for freedom of religion and worship and prohibit discrimination based on religion. The constitution recognizes Roman Catholicism as the religion of the majority of citizens but not as the state religion. In March the Ministry of Education issued a resolution allowing girls attending public schools in the provinces of Panama City and Herrera to wear the hijab. Public schools continued to teach Catholicism, but parents could exempt their children from religion classes. Some non-Catholic groups continued to state the government provided preferential distribution of subsidies to small Catholic-run private schools for salaries and operating expenses and cited the level of government support given to the Catholic Church in preparation for the January 2019 World Youth Day. Local Catholic organizers continued to invite members of other religious denominations to participate. Some social media commentators criticized the use of public funds for the religious event.

On August 16, the Interreligious Institute of Panama, an interfaith organization, held a public gathering entitled, “Interfaith Coexistence towards a Culture of Peace.” Approximately 100 individuals attended. The institute’s objectives included providing a coordination mechanism for interfaith activities and promoting mutual respect and appreciation among various religious groups. On August 29, the Panama Chapter of the Soka Gakkai International Buddhist Cultural Center hosted its Second Interreligious Dialogue with panelists from the Baha’i Spiritual Community, Kol-Shearith Jewish Congregation, Krishna-Hindu community, and Catholic Church.

Embassy officials met on several occasions with government officials and raised questions about fairness in distribution of education subsidies for religious schools and the need for equal treatment of all religious groups before the law. The Ambassador, Charge d’Affaires, and other embassy officials met frequently with religious leaders to discuss government treatment of members of religious groups, interfaith initiatives promoting tolerance and respect for religious diversity, and societal perceptions and treatment of members of religious groups.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.8 million (July 2018 estimate). The Ministry of Health estimates 69.7 percent of the population is

Catholic and 18 percent evangelical Protestant. Episcopalian (part of the Anglican Communion) and Methodist bishops state their communities have 11,000 and 1,500 members, respectively; the Buddhist community reports 3,000 members; and the Lutheran Church reports 1,000 members. Smaller religious groups, found primarily in Panama City and other larger urban areas, include Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Baha'is, Pentecostals, and Rastafarians. Baptists and Methodists derive their membership in large part from the African Antillean and expatriate communities.

Jewish leaders estimate their community to number 15,000 members, centered largely in Panama City. The Muslim community, largely comprising Arab and Pakistani-origin individuals, and mostly Sunni, numbers approximately 14,000 and is centered primarily in Panama City, Colon City, and Penonome, with smaller congregations in David and Santiago in the western part of the country. There are approximately 850 Rastafarians, most of whom live in Colon City and La Chorrera. Indigenous religions, including Ibeorgun (prevalent among the Guna community), Mama Tata and Mama Chi (prevalent among the Ngobe Bugle community), and Embera (prevalent among the Embera community), are found in their respective indigenous communities located throughout the country.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution, laws, and executive decrees prohibit discrimination based on religious practices and provide for freedom of religion and worship, provided that "Christian morality and public order" are respected. The constitution recognizes Catholicism as the religion of the majority of citizens but does not designate it as the state religion. It limits the public offices religious ministers and members of religious orders may hold to those related to social assistance, education, and scientific research. It forbids the formation of political parties based on religion. The constitution prohibits discrimination toward public servants based on their religious practices or beliefs.

The constitution grants legal status to religious associations, permitting them to manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law. If groups decline to register, they may not apply for grants or subsidies. To register, a group must submit to the Ministry of Government (MOG) a power of attorney, charter, names of the board members (if applicable), a copy of the internal bylaws

(if applicable), and a four balboa (\$4) processing fee. Once the MOG approves the registration, the religious association must register the MOG's resolution in the Public Registry. Registered religious associations must apply to the Directorate of Internal Revenue of the Ministry of Economy and Finance to receive clearance for duty-free imports. The government may grant government properties to registered religious associations upon approval by the Legislative Tax Committee and the cabinet. The law states income from religious activities is tax exempt as long as it is collected through such activities as church and burial services and charitable events.

The constitution requires public schools to provide instruction on Catholic teachings. Parents may exempt their children from religious education. The constitution also allows for the establishment of private religious schools. It is illegal to base enrollment of students in private schools on religion. Students of a faith separate from their educational institution are allowed to practice their religion freely.

Immigration law grants foreign religious workers temporary missionary worker visas they must renew every two years, for up to a total of six years. Catholic and Orthodox Christian priests and nuns are exempt from the two-year renewal requirement and issued six-year visas because of the constitutional provision allowing all religions to worship freely, with no limitation other than "respect for Christian morality." Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim clergy, as well as other religious workers, are also eligible for the special six-year visa; however, they must submit additional documentation with their applications. These additional requirements include a copy of the organization's bylaws, the MOG-issued registration certificate, and a letter from the organization's leader in the country certifying the religious worker will be employed at its place of worship. The application fee is 250 balboas (\$250) for all religious denominations.

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

### **Government Practices**

The law continued to require Muslim women, Catholic nuns, and Rastafarians to pull back their head covering to show their ears in pictures taken by immigration officials upon their arrival in the country. Civil registry and customs authorities, however, continued to allow the taking of photographs and conducting of body searches in private if requested to do so. According to the Ombudsman's Office

and a leader of the Muslim community, there were no complaints regarding these procedures.

In August members of the indigenous Guna community protested outside the Electoral Tribunal for alleged discrimination involving an Ibeorgun woman. According to *La Estrella* newspaper, government officials had required that she remove her ceremonial *olasu u orasu*, or religious nose piercing, for a national identification photograph. After the incident, the Electoral Tribunal instructed regional offices they could not force a citizen to remove the piercing, according to Law 20 of June 2000, which protects the right to traditional garb.

In March, upon the request of the Sunni Muslim Religious Association of Panama, the Ministry of Education issued a resolution allowing girls attending public schools in the provinces of Panama City and Herrera to wear hijabs.

Catholic schools continued to represent the majority of parochial educational institutions. According to a Ministry of Education official, non-Catholic religious schools received equal consideration regarding government grants; however, privately some non-Catholic groups continued to state the government provided preferential distribution of subsidies to small Catholic-run private schools for salaries and operating expenses. These non-Catholic groups also pointed to the government's continued support for the January 2019 World Youth Day event as a sign of preference. The Ministry of Education reported that in accordance with a decree mandating "fair and equitable allocation of funds to schools," it had granted government subsidies ranging from 5,000 to 50,000 balboas (\$5,000-\$50,000) to small religious and nonreligious private schools, including a Panama City-based Catholic school and an evangelical Protestant school. The Ministry of Education also provided a subsidy of 367,000 balboas (\$367,000) to an Episcopalian (Anglican) school to cover the school's annual teacher and administrative staff payroll. The government provided 90,000 balboas (\$90,000) for social programs conducted by the Catholic-run school Colegio Javier.

In February the National Assembly Budget Committee approved the government's request for additional funds to reconstruct several Catholic facilities in Herrera Province. In May the government allocated 210,359 balboas (\$210,000) to build a new Catholic church in Valle Rico, Las Tablas. The funds came from the budget of the Social Assistance Directorate, an office within the Ministry of the Presidency.

Throughout the year, the government continued to coordinate closely with the Vatican on preparations for hosting World Youth Day in January 2019. In August the government sponsored 105 Catholic youth to take language courses at the University of Panama to serve as interpreters during World Youth Day. Local Catholic organizers continued to invite members of other religious denominations to participate; however, some social media commentators criticized the use of public funds for the religious event. The posting of World Youth Day banners at public schools throughout the country was commonplace. The National Migration Service announced it would waive a requirement that tourists attending the event possess \$500 in funds to apply for a visa if they applied as a “religious pilgrim.”

The government continued to rely primarily on Catholic clergy to conduct religious invocations at government events, including National Assembly openings and reconvenings. Many official celebrations included participation of the highest-ranking officials at Catholic masses, including the Te Deum on November 3. Muslims and Jews continued to serve in senior positions in the government, such as ambassador to Spain (Jewish) and minister counselor of the Ministry of the Presidency (Muslim).

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

The Interreligious Institute of Panama, an interfaith committee made up of representatives of the Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, and other Protestant churches, Salvation Army, Colon Islamic Congregation, the Baha’i Faith, and Kol Shearith Jewish Congregation, continued to meet several times during the year. The institute’s objectives included providing a coordination mechanism for interfaith activities and promoting mutual respect and appreciation among the various religious groups. On August 16, the institute held a public gathering where a noted Baha’i representative, the Kol-Shearith Jewish rabbi, a well-known evangelical television personality, the vice rector of St. Mary’s Catholic University, a secular Episcopalian, and the newly arrived Israeli ambassador, who is a member of the Israeli Druze community, spoke before a crowd of approximately 100 individuals on “Interfaith Coexistence Towards a Culture of Peace.”

On August 29, the Soka Gakkai International Buddhist Cultural Center – Panama Chapter hosted its Second Inter-Religious Dialogue, entitled “A Step Towards Peace: (Working) Together for a Collective Happiness.” Leaders of the Baha’i Spiritual Community, the Kol-Shearith Jewish Congregation, the Krishna-Hindu community and a Catholic priest participated as panelists. Participants discussed

human rights, humane education, and the role of civil society in achieving peace and happiness. An observer of the dialogue said participants agreed all persons had the right to practice the religion they wanted and with the denomination they desired. They also agreed all practitioners should move beyond simply tolerating others towards relations of mutual respect.

Local Catholic organizers continued to invite members of other religious denominations to host World Youth Day participants to expose them to other faiths. Members of the Interreligious Institute noted plans to host World Youth Day participants in the homes of persons of Muslim, Baha'i, Jewish, and non-Catholic Christian faiths.

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

Embassy officials periodically met with officials of the Ministry of Education and the Ombudsman's Office to discuss government policies regarding the equal treatment of all religious groups and individuals, including those belonging to religious minorities. They also inquired about pending religious discrimination claims submitted to the government, including those regarding alleged unfairness in government allocation of education subsidies for religious schools.

The Ambassador, Charge d'Affaires, and other embassy officials met several times with Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Rastafarian, Baha'i, Episcopalian, Lutheran, other Protestant, and evangelical Protestant leaders, religious groups, and community organizations. They discussed religious freedom issues, including government treatment of religious groups, interfaith initiatives promoting tolerance and respect for religious diversity, and societal perceptions.

In November the Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials joined the Kol-Shearith Jewish Congregation for Shabbat service, where the Charge delivered remarks in memory of the victims of the Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh and thanked the community for its solidarity.

Embassy social media channels were used periodically throughout the year to commemorate holidays of various religions and recognize International Religious Freedom Day in October.