

PANAMA 2019 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. 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 high level of government support provided the Catholic Church for the January World Youth Day. Although local Catholic organizers invited and included members of other religious groups to participate in World Youth Day, some social media commentators criticized the use of public funds for the religious event.

On April 30, representatives from the Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Baha'i, and Buddhist faiths participated in an interreligious event to pray for peace during the country's general election campaign. This was the first time an interreligious event took place around an election. On June 25, religious leaders from multiple faiths joined an event to sign the Cordoba Declaration, which recognizes Latin America and the Caribbean as a "Zone of Religious Coexistence." On October 29, the Catholic University of Santa Maria La Antigua (USMA) hosted an international symposium on religious freedom, humanitarian assistance, and human dignity, jointly hosted by Brigham Young University's International Center for Law and Religion Studies.

U.S. embassy officials met on several occasions with government officials and continued to raise questions about fairness in the distribution of education subsidies for religious-affiliated schools and the need for equal treatment of all religious groups before the law. The 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 4.3 million (midyear 2019 estimate). The Ministry of Health estimates 69.7 percent of the population is

Catholic and 18 percent evangelical Protestant. Episcopalian and Methodist bishops state their communities have 11,000 and 1,500 members, respectively. Jewish leaders estimate their community at 15,000 members, centered largely in Panama City. According to a leader within the Shia Muslim community, the Muslim community, including Shia and Sunni, numbers approximately 14,000 and is centered primarily in Panama City, Colon, and Penonome, with smaller concentrations in David and Santiago in the western part of the country. The Muslim community includes Shia Muslims, primarily of Lebanese origin, and Sunni Muslims, primarily of Arab and Pakistani origin. The Baha'i community reports 6,000 members; the Buddhist community 3,000 members; and the Lutheran Church 1,000 members. Smaller religious groups, found primarily in Panama City and other large urban areas, include Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), 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.

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 that clergy 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 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 its 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 record 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.

Registered religious groups include the Roman Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox Church, Episcopal Church, Methodist Church, Evangelical Methodist Church, the Baha'i Faith, Soka Gakkai International (Buddhist), Muslim Congregation of Colon, Muslim Congregation of Panama City, Muslim Congregation of Cocle Province, Muslim Congregation of Chiriqui Province, Jewish Kol Shearith Israel Congregation, Jewish Shevet Ahim Congregation, Jewish Beth El Congregation, Baptist Church, Church of Jesus Christ, Hossana Evangelical Church, Casa de Oracion (house of prayer) Cristiana Evangelical Church, Pentecostal Church, Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church, Crossroads Christian Church, and Ministry of the Family Christian Church. The Rastafarian Congregation is not registered.

By law, indigenous tribes have control of their own autonomous lands within the country, which are called *comarcas* (counties). The oldest one, established in 1938, belongs to the Guna Yala tribe. This autonomy allows them to practice their religions and cultural traditions without interference from the state.

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. Private religious schools may not refuse to enroll a student simply because they are not a member of that particular religion. Students of a faith separate from their educational institution are allowed to practice their religion freely.

Vaccinations are encouraged as a health issue but are not mandatory. The law does not require students to show proof of vaccination before they are allowed to register, at either public or private schools.

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

According to government sources, there were no pending religious applications before the Ministry of Government at year’s end. According to Rastafarian representatives, the congregation did not plan to register for legal status; they said the community was small and met informally at individual homes because there were no formal places of worship. Additionally, the Rastafarian community stated it had no plans to import religious articles for distribution, one of the primary reasons why religious organizations applied for legal status.

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, stating the government provided more funds to Catholic schools than other religious schools because there were more of them; however, privately some non-Catholic groups continued to state the government provided preferential distribution of the two-year cycle subsidies to small Catholic-run private schools for salaries and operating expenses. According to the Ombudsman’s Office, there were no religious discrimination claims submitted to the government during the year and none pending from previous years. The last complaint of religious discrimination received by the Ombudsman’s Office was filed in 2017 by a Rastafarian youth who was not allowed to enter a public school due to his braids. The Ombudsman’s Office reached out to the school principal, and the student was allowed to re-enter his school, thereby resolving the situation.

In January the country hosted World Youth Day in conjunction with the Vatican. Although the lead organizer was the local Catholic Church, the government provided logistical and security support for the event, which attracted

approximately 250,000 foreign visitors. Non-Catholic groups said the government's logistical and financial support for World Youth Day represented government preference for the Catholic Church. Some social media commentators also said the government showed religious bias because it used public monies to fund a Catholic event. According to an official government expense report, the previous administration spent 44 million balboas (\$44 million) to fund World Youth Day.

The government continued to invite primarily Catholic clergy to conduct religious invocations at government events, including the opening of the National Assembly. Many official celebrations included the participation of high-ranking clergy of many religions at Catholic masses, including the *Te Deum* on November 3, which featured clergy of all member groups of the Interreligious Institute of Panama, with the president attending and in commemoration of the country's 116th year of independence. Muslims and Jews continued to serve in senior positions in the government, including as ambassadors.

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. Early in the year the institute extended an invitation to the Buddhist Soka Gakkai Congregation to join the group, which the congregation accepted. The institute's objectives included providing a coordination mechanism for interfaith activities and promoting mutual respect and appreciation among the various religious groups.

In July the Jewish "Conciencia Viva" (Live Consciousness) movement organized an interfaith event commemorating the 25th anniversary of the terrorist bombing of an Alas Chiricanas flight in which 20 persons lost their lives, the majority of them members of the country's Jewish community. The two presidents, current President Laurentino Cortizo and former president Juan Carlos Varela, attended along with many others, including Catholic and Muslim clergy.

The Interreligious Institute reported persons of Muslim, Baha'i, Jewish, and non-Catholic Christian faiths hosted World Youth Day participants. Young Catholics from throughout the world attended, and a wide variety of religious organizations hosted participants in their homes and at their institutions' facilities. Muslim

groups in Colon District, Panama City, hosted dinners for Youth Day participants and donated water during the event. The Kol Shearith Jewish congregation hosted Catholic youth in their synagogue, and the Islamic community put up banners welcoming Pope Francis. Clergy representing all of the major religious groups joined the pope for an interfaith Mass. Several religious leaders said they spent a large amount of their budgets and resources on World Youth Day, leaving fewer resources to host other interreligious events for the rest of the year.

On April 30, an interreligious service was held to pray for peace in advance of the country's May 5 general election. Representatives from Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Baha'i, and Buddhist faiths attended the service, the first interfaith event held in support of a peaceful electoral process.

On June 25, religious leaders from multiple faiths signed the Cordoba Declaration, which recognizes Latin America and the Caribbean as a "Zone of Religious Coexistence." Those signing the declaration included leaders of the Muslim community, the Jewish community of Kol Shearith, the Buddhist community of Soka Gokkai, as well as the leader of the Baha'i community and the Catholic Archbishop of Panama. According to a document issued by the Religions for Peace (*Religiones por la Paz*), an international interfaith group founded in Germany in 1970, the Cordoba Declaration was the starting point for the creation and deepening of programs and projects that promote Latin American and Caribbean interreligious coexistence.

On October 29, the USMA hosted an international symposium on religious freedom, humanitarian assistance, and human dignity, jointly with Brigham Young University's International Center for Law and Religion Studies. Invited speakers came from the United States and other Latin American countries and featured Catholic, Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim panelists. According to conference participants, they discussed how different religions approached religious freedom and humanitarian assistance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials 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 if there were any pending religious discrimination claims submitted to the government, including any regarding unfairness reported

by some religious minority groups in government allocation of education subsidies for religious schools.

The 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.

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