

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religious belief and practice, including worship. It prohibits discrimination based on religion. Laws prohibit actions that incite religious hatred and violence. Prime Minister Keith Rowley issued public messages for major religious holidays, underscoring religious freedom, diversity, and unity. According to the Inter-Religious Organization's (IRO) public relations officer, the National Council of Orisha Elders of Trinidad and Tobago continued to await government recognition of the Orisha religion. According to the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC), eight religious-based discrimination complaints, most involving public or private sector employment, were filed during the year, compared with nine in 2019.

The IRO, an interfaith coordinating committee representing approximately 25 religious groups and receiving both private and public funding, continued to advocate for the importance of religious tolerance. During the year, it received government funding to distribute food baskets and supplies to those in their communities affected by COVID-19, including noncitizens residing in the country. IRO members continued to ask religious communities to open their doors to support Venezuelans and all citizens affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

U.S. embassy officials engaged the government, including the EOC, on the importance of religious freedom and tolerance for religious diversity. The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued virtual outreach with religious leaders. The embassy hosted virtual meetings throughout the year to discuss COVID-19's impact on the religious community, religious pluralism, and interfaith cooperation and religious tolerance among nonmember and member representatives of the IRO. The embassy also promoted religious freedom and tolerance through social media.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.2 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2011 local census, 26.5 percent of the population is Protestant, 21.6 percent Roman Catholic, 18.2 percent Hindu, 5 percent Muslim, and 1.5 percent Jehovah's Witnesses. Traditional Caribbean religious groups with African roots include the Spiritual/Shouter Baptists, who represent 5.7 percent of

the population, and the Orisha, who incorporate elements of West African Yoruba spiritualism and Christianity, at 0.9 percent. The census also reports 2.2 percent of the population has no religious affiliation, 11.1 percent do not state a religious affiliation, and 7.5 percent list their affiliation as “other,” which includes several small Christian groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as well as Baha’is, Rastafarians, Buddhists, and Jews.

The religious composition of the two-island country is distinct. On Trinidad, which contains 95 percent of the country’s population, those of African descent make up 32 percent of the population and are predominantly Christian. A small, primarily Sunni Muslim community is concentrated in and around Port of Spain, along the east-west corridor of northern Trinidad, and in certain areas of central and south Trinidad. Persons of East Indian descent constitute 37 percent of the population, approximately half of whom are Hindu, in addition to Muslims, Presbyterians, and Catholics. The population of Tobago is 85 percent of African descent and predominantly Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religious belief and observance, including worship. It recognizes the existence of fundamental human rights and freedoms and prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The law prohibits acts of sedition and seditious intent, which include engendering or promoting feelings of ill will towards, hostility to, or contempt for any class of inhabitants, including based on religion.

A fine of up to 1,000 Trinidad and Tobago dollars (TTD) (\$150) may be levied for expressions of hatred directed specifically against a person’s religion, including any “riotous, violent, indecent, or disorderly behavior in any place of divine worship” or attacks, ridicule, or vilification of another person’s religion in a manner likely to provoke a breach of the peace. The law is rarely enforced.

The law also prescribes a fine and imprisonment of two years for “any person who is convicted of any act or an attempt to commit blasphemy, writing and publishing, or printing and publishing, any blasphemous libel,” but the government does not enforce the law.

Judicial review, with the power of the court to modify or enforce orders, is available to those who state they are victims of religious discrimination. Claimants may also appeal a court's decision.

Possession and use of up to 30 grams of marijuana is legal, but the consumption of marijuana is illegal in public spaces. The law also provides a pathway for the expungement of prior marijuana convictions, including for those using marijuana for religious rituals, and it allows individuals to cultivate plants for personal use.

Religious groups must register with the government to receive tax-exempt donations or gifts of land, perform marriages, or receive visas for foreign missionaries. To register, groups must demonstrate they are nonprofit organizations, be in operation for at least one year, and submit a request for charitable status to the Ministry of Finance. The request must include a certificate or articles of incorporation, the constitution and bylaws of the organization, and the most recently audited financial statements. Religious groups have the same rights and obligations as most legal entities, regardless of their registration status. They may, for example, own land and hire employees, and they are liable for property taxes and government-mandated employee benefits.

Chaplains representing different faiths present in the country may visit prisons to perform religious acts and minister to prisoners.

The EOC is established by law as an independent body composed of five commissioners appointed by the President with advice from the Prime Minister and leader of the opposition. The EOC is charged with eliminating discrimination through investigating and resolving complaints through conciliation as well as with developing education programs.

The government permits religious instruction in public schools, allocating time each week during which any religious group may provide an instructor at the parent's request for an adherent in the school. Attendance at these classes is voluntary, and the religious groups represented are diverse. The law states public schools may not refuse admission to individuals based on religious beliefs, and no child is required to attend any religious observance or receive instruction in religious subjects as a condition of admission or continued attendance in a public school. Private schools, also called "assisted schools," receive a combination of government and private funding.

The government subsidizes religiously affiliated public schools, including schools operated by Christian, Hindu, and Muslim groups. The government allots primary school funding on a per-pupil basis, with the amount varying each year. For secondary schools, the government allots funding based on budget requests submitted by each school.

No child over two months of age is permitted to enter a nursery, preschool, or primary school without first being immunized or having started the immunization process. The law does not make an exception for religious beliefs.

Parents may enroll their children in religiously affiliated or other private schools, or in some cases, homeschool them as an alternative to public education as long as a parent interested in homeschooling submits a letter of intent to the Ministry of Education, which determines if the parent is qualified.

Foreign missionaries must meet standard requirements for entry visas and must represent a registered religious group in the country. Permits are valid for a maximum period of three years at a cost of TTD 500 (\$75) per year. Missionaries may not remain longer than three years per visit but may reenter after a year's absence.

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

Government Practices

According to the IRO public relations officer, the National Council of Orisha Elders of Trinidad and Tobago continued to wait for the government to recognize the Orisha religious group. Its registration application was submitted to the government in 2018.

According to the EOC, a total of eight religious-based discrimination complaints were filed during the year, compared with nine in 2019. Most of the complaints were employment related, including in both the public and private sectors. According to the report, cases involved Christians, Hebrew Israelites, Hindus, Muslims, and Orishas.

The government continued to limit the number of long-term foreign missionaries to 35 per registered religious group. Missionaries in excess of the 35 individuals allowed could remain in the country for a maximum of 30 days. IRO members said the government equitably applied the law. Some international religious

groups, however, said more than 35 missionaries could remain in the country if they affiliated with more than one registered group, including nonprofit groups and charities. According to the president of the IRO, religious institutions could apply to extend the stay of their missionaries, but there was no guarantee of approval.

Members of the government and political party officials continued to participate and mark ceremonies and holidays of the various religious groups and emphasized religious tolerance and harmony in their virtual remarks. Prime Minister Rowley issued public messages for Easter and Ramadan, underscoring religious freedom, diversity, and unity. In his Ramadan message, Rowley recognized the challenges faced because of COVID-19, especially during Ramadan, including the inability to congregate because of stay-at-home measures. He also thanked Muslims for their donations to those affected by COVID-19.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The IRO, which includes Christian denominations as well as Islamic, Hindu, Orisha, and Baha'i groups, continued to advocate for matters of religious and social concern. IRO members continued to ask their religious communities to open their doors to support Venezuelans and citizens affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In May, faith-based organizations, including those belonging to IRO, received 30 million TTD (\$4.48 million) from the government to distribute humanitarian aid to their communities and other individuals affected by COVID-19. The grants could be used only to purchase food supplies to prepare food baskets and meals and to provide other food support for those adversely affected by the pandemic, including noncitizens.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials engaged the government, including the EOC, regarding its support for religious freedom and tolerance for religious diversity.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued virtual outreach with religious leaders. In October, the embassy hosted a virtual meeting with IRO members to discuss interfaith cooperation and religious tolerance among nonmember and member representatives of the IRO as well as COVID-19's impact on the religious community.

Embassy staff met virtually with Muslim religious and civil society leaders, including imams, for discussions on topics that included religious tolerance.

The embassy shared content on its social media platforms promoting religious freedom and tolerance. It also hosted virtual events in May and October. In May, the virtual discussion centered on COVID-19's impact on the religious community. In October, the embassy honored International Religious Freedom Day by hosting a virtual event on religious pluralism.

The embassy provided a grant to a nongovernmental organization to implement projects promoting trust and cooperation among religious and cultural groups in the country.