

GUYANA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship, including the right to choose and change one's religion. Representatives of the Rastafarian community continued to state a law criminalizing the possession of 15 grams or more of marijuana infringed on their religious practices. In January, the government introduced a bill before the National Assembly to remove custodial sentences for the possession of fewer than 30 grams of cannabis and remove fines for using cannabis. The draft bill was sent to a parliamentary select committee on January 28, where it remained pending at year's end. In October, a Hindu citizen in an editorial criticized the Ministry of Education for allowing a prayer that he characterized as Christian to be recited at a government-sponsored ceremony, citing it as discriminatory. The ministry replied that the prayer was universal and commonly used in parliamentary sessions. The constitution mandates an Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC) to promote ethnic and religious harmony and it includes representatives of the country's main religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. During the year, the government did not select new members to replace the ERC commissioners, whose terms expired in April. The government continued to promote religious tolerance and diversity, including through public messaging on religious holidays. In January, the Ministry of Human Services and Social Services formalized its Support and Heal Network (SAHN) initiative, a partnership between the ministry and nearly 30 leaders of the country's religious communities with the stated goal to strengthen interfaith cooperation, increase tolerance, and address social inequities and marginalization of communities.

The Inter-Religious Organization of Guyana (IROG), whose members include representatives of the Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Rastafarian, and Baha'i faiths, continued to conduct interfaith efforts, including by publishing messages in support of religious tolerance, and its constituent religious groups continued to lead and participate in programs promoting interfaith tolerance and religious freedom. Their programs included the establishment of a Women of Faith Network and hosting a series of discussions during UN World Interfaith Harmony Week in February. Religious leaders said there was a high degree of religious tolerance in the country, but politics inflamed ethnic tensions, especially around national elections. Religious leaders said faith could be a vehicle for healing ethnic tensions, but they were wary of proceeding too deeply into the political sphere,

explaining that doing so could lead to claims of bias and therefore diminish their stature and ability to impartially carry out their work.

In November, the Ambassador met with the Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Governance to discuss protection of religious freedom and support for interfaith harmony. In March, the Ambassador met with the ERC to discuss cooperation in promoting religious harmony in the country. In April, the Ambassador hosted an iftar for leaders of the Muslim, Christian, Rastafarian, and Baha'i communities. The religious leaders discussed how promoting religious tolerance could heal ethnic divisions. U.S. embassy officials met with representatives of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups throughout the year and discussed issues related to religious tolerance. Embassy officials amplified messages of religious tolerance on social media with greetings posted on Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish holidays.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 788,000 (midyear 2021). According to the 2012 national census, the most recent, 64 percent of the population is Christian, 25 percent Hindu, and 7 percent Muslim (mainly Sunni). Less than 1 percent belongs to other religious groups, which include Rastafarians, Baha'is, Afro-descendent Faithists, and Areruya, an indigenous faith system. An estimated 3 percent of the population does not profess a religious affiliation. Among Christians, Pentecostals comprise 23 percent of the population; Roman Catholics, 7 percent; Anglicans, 5 percent; Seventh-day Adventists, 5 percent; Methodists, 1 percent; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, less than 1 percent, and other Christians, 21 percent, which includes those belonging to the Assembly of God Church, Church of Christ, and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, among others.

The membership of most religious groups includes a cross section of ethnic groups, although nearly all Hindus are of South Asian descent, and most Rastafarians are of African descent. Most Muslims are of South Asian descent, but there is also a significant Afro-Muslim population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship, including the right to choose and change one's religion. The constitution protects the right of religious groups to provide religious instructions to their adherents. No citizen is compelled to take part in any religious education, ceremony, or observance of a religion not his or her own without consent. The constitution forbids taking an oath contrary to one's religion or belief. An unenforced law prescribes a prison term of one year for a blasphemous libel conviction; however, the law exempts religious expression made in "good faith and decent language."

The constitution mandates the establishment of the ERC, with the purpose of promoting ethnic harmony and eliminating ethnic discrimination. The ERC includes representatives of the country's main religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.

There is no official system for formal registration of a religious group, but to receive government recognition, all places of worship must register through the Deeds Registry. The Deeds Registry requires an organization to submit a proposed name and address for the place of worship, as well as the names of executive group members or congregation leaders. Once formally recognized, a place of worship falls under legislation governing nonprofit organizations, allowing the organization to conduct financial operations, buy property, and receive tax benefits in its name.

Foreign religious workers require a visa from the Ministry of Home Affairs. Religious groups seeking to enter an indigenous village for the purpose of proselytizing must apply for and obtain permission from the village council. Application to a village council must include the name of the group, the names of its members who will be going to the village, their purpose, and the estimated date of arrival.

There is no religious education in public schools, regardless of whether the school is religiously affiliated. Most public schools' religious affiliations are Anglican or Methodist. There are both public and private religiously affiliated schools. Private schools are operated entirely by private groups and are not funded by the state. All students attending private religious schools must participate in religious education, regardless of a student's religious beliefs.

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

Government Practices

According to media, representatives of the Rastafarian community continued to state a law criminalizing the possession of 15 grams or more of marijuana infringed on their religious practices. “To deny me the holy herb for my sacrament is to deny me my human rights,” said Ras Simeon, an elder from the Rastafarian community. In January, the government introduced into the National Assembly a draft bill to remove prison time for possession of up to 30 grams of marijuana and to remove the fine for smoking or otherwise using cannabis. After the bill’s introduction, it was sent to a select parliamentary committee for further deliberation on January 28. At year’s end, the bill remained pending in committee. The Guyana Rastafari Council continued to petition the government to legalize the use of small amounts of marijuana for religious purposes, holding regular protests in front of the office of the Attorney General. In October, the general secretary of the council told media that authorities had conducted raids on their places of worship to seize marijuana. He said the Rastafarian community would not stop planting or consuming marijuana and that authorities used drug laws as an excuse to publicly harass Rastafarians. In July, the IROG, composed of representatives of all religious groups, including Rastafarians, released a statement to support “comprehensive law reform to recognize and respect the religious rights of the Rastafari community.” A Rastafarian member of the IROG said he did not believe that the measures taken by the government to introduce but not pass legislation were sufficient and asked for international support to lobby the government.

The government continued to maintain regulations limiting the number of visas for foreign representatives of religious groups based on historical trends, the relative size of the group, and the President’s discretion; however, the government and religious groups, whose membership included foreign missionaries, continued to state the government did not apply the visa limitation rule. Religious groups also said the visa quotas the government allotted to them were sufficient and did not adversely affect their activities.

In February, one of the ERC’s Muslim commissioners called the organization “dysfunctional and wasteful” and said it was not fulfilling its mandate. According to the commissioner, the ERC, established in 2000 and reconstituted in 2018, continued to provide public messaging during local holidays, but its other public activities were limited, as the commissioners’ three-year term expired in April and the government did not name new members during the year.

The government continued to promote interfaith harmony and respect for diversity through its public messaging. On all major Christian, Hindu, and Islamic holidays, President Mohammed Irfaan Ali delivered national messages. During Ramadan,

Ali stated, “Ramadan teaches us to have love for all and hatred for none.” In his Easter message, Ali stated, “Christ’s selfless action and sacrifice must be the lesson [to] sacrifice for the greater good of humanity,” and in his Diwali message, Ali stated, “May the sacred festival of Diwali ignite in all of us the flame of love and concern for others, and may it bless us with the spirit of generosity.”

In January, the Ministry of Human Services and Social Services formalized its SAHN initiative, a partnership among the ministry and nearly 30 leaders from religious communities with the stated goal of increasing tolerance and strengthening interfaith cooperation, as well as developing recommendations and strategies to address social inequities and the marginalization of communities. The government initiated the partnership as a response to the August 2020 killing of two Afro-Guyanese minors that many in the country viewed as ethnically motivated. During the year, faith leaders belonging to SAHN reached out to communities affected by violence and offered financial support and counseling for family members. The organization was fully government run, and its membership could not speak on its behalf without ministry clearance.

While many prominent religious leaders asked their congregations to receive the COVID-19 vaccination, according to press reporting in July, Minister of Health Frank Anthony expressed concern that several religious leaders in rural communities were discouraging congregants from being vaccinated on religious grounds. “We’re confronted in some communities where people who have influence in those communities; some of the faith-based leaders have been telling their church members not [to] take vaccine,” the minister said. According to press, the ministry aimed to increase rural outreach to religious leaders to increase vaccination rates.

Several individuals active in religious circles said that the government favored certain Christian, Muslim, and Hindu groups over others due to the personal affiliations of government ministers. They said, however, that this favoritism did not affect freedom of religious expression or practice in the country.

In October, a Hindu citizen criticized the Ministry of Education in an editorial for allowing a prayer that he characterized as Christian to be recited at a ceremony announcing the results of the Caribbean Examinations Council (the regional organization overseeing curriculum and examinations processes), citing it as discriminatory. The ministry replied that the prayer was universal, stating it was the same prayer routinely recited during parliamentary sessions. In a statement, the ministry reiterated the government position that “no one religion, ethnicity,

gender, etc. is or should be made to be seen as dominant over the other, and [it] has noted that there have been some events where the intention of the ministry and its policy was not followed and had re-issued a memo, with the universal prayer attached, reminding of said policy.”

Government representatives continued to meet with leaders of various religious groups with the expressed aim of promoting social cohesion and discussing the tolerance of diversity, including of Muslim, Hindu, and Christian groups. Government officials also participated regularly in the observance of Christian, Hindu, and Islamic religious holidays throughout the year. The government continued to declare some holy days of the country’s three major religious groups, including Eid al-Adha, Holi, Easter, and Diwali, as national holidays.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The IROG, whose membership includes approximately 40 religious bodies and organizations, continued its stated purpose of promoting social cohesion and respecting religious diversity through its programs and initiatives. IROG hosted a series of events during UN World Interfaith Harmony Week in February, including a panel discussion at the University of Guyana and an interfaith program of prayers and reflection. In March, IROG launched the Women of Faith Network to promote the participation of women from different faith traditions in peace building. In August, during a roundtable discussion, IROG participants, including representatives of Baha’i, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups, stated their religious groups did not discriminate against members of the LGBTQI+ community but did not condone the open practice of their lifestyle.

Because religion, ethnicity, and politics are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize issues as being solely based on religious identity. According to religious leaders, there was a high degree of religious tolerance, but politics inflamed ethnic tensions, especially around national elections. They said faith could be a vehicle for healing ethnic tensions, but they were wary of proceeding too deeply into the political sphere, explaining it could lead to claims of bias and therefore diminish their stature and ability to impartially carry out their work.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In November, the Ambassador met with the Minister for Parliamentary Affairs and Governance, who is the government focal point for religious affairs, regarding the government’s stated commitment to support religious freedom and interfaith

tolerance. The Ambassador recognized the importance of tolerance and respect for its multiple faiths and stated that the reconstitution of the ERC following the April expiration of its board would be viewed as a further avenue for promoting interfaith harmony.

In April, the Ambassador hosted an iftar for leaders of Muslim, Christian, Baha'i, and Rastafarian communities. The group discussed how promoting religious tolerance could help heal ethnic divisions. In August, embassy officials organized a roundtable that included representatives of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups, in which they discussed issues related to religious tolerance, fostering cohesion and respect for religious differences, and the challenges for worship during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Embassy officials amplified messages of respect for religious diversity with regular social media postings on Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish religious holidays.