

# **TIMOR-LESTE 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship and of religious instruction. There is no official state religion, although Catholicism is the predominant religion. Religious organizations may register with the government under the regulations provided for nonprofit corporate bodies. Religious minority groups continued to report instances in which civil servants rejected marriage and birth certificates issued by religious organizations other than the Roman Catholic Church. Muslim religious leaders continued to express concerns about discriminatory practices in civil service hiring. As part of its annual budget, the government allocated \$15 million for distribution among the country's three Catholic dioceses, in line with the terms of its concordat with the Holy See. Non-Catholic groups reported tensions regarding unequal allocation of government funds, since non-Catholic religious groups needed to apply for funding from a separate source instead of receiving a dedicated budget allocation. In October, the multireligious Asosiasaun Turizmu Relijiousu Timor-Leste (ATR-TL), or Faith-based Tourism Association, launched and received a \$110,000 grant from the government to support its work. Government leaders continued to meet with religious leaders as part of the government's broader engagement with civil society.

Members of minority religious groups, including from the Muslim and Protestant communities, generally reported there was religious tolerance in the country. However, some noted continuing strong societal pressure for individuals to remain in the Catholic Church, particularly from family or community members.

U.S. embassy officials engaged regularly on religious freedom issues with government officials, including from the Office of the Prime Minister on issues including discrimination in civil service hiring, recognition of religious minority documentation, and budget allocations to minority religious groups. The embassy continued to fund programs to promote religious freedom and the preservation of religious sites.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.4 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2015 census, 97.6 percent of the population is Catholic,

approximately 2 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 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 based on religious beliefs and provides for 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.

The law criminalizes religious or racial discrimination. Members of groups organized to incite or encourage discrimination based on race or religion face imprisonment of between four and 12 years. Those who through written or other social communication means spread ideas with the intent to incite racial or religious discrimination or encourage or provoke violence against a person or group of people based on race, color, ethnic origin, or religion may be punished with imprisonment from two to eight years.

Religious organizations that conduct religious services but do not engage in other activities do not need to register with the government and may 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. 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 elective subject in public schools. Most schools in the country are public, although the Catholic Church also operates private schools. Non-Catholic students may attend Catholic schools. Religious classes are compulsory in private Catholic schools.

A chaplain who is Catholic and a citizen may serve in the armed forces. 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 non-missionary religious officials 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**

Muslim and Protestant religious minority leaders again reported that notaries public rejected marriage and birth certificates from religious organizations other than the Catholic Church when submitted as supporting documentation required by individuals registering for schools and for other official acts. The leaders stated this occurred on an ad hoc rather than systematic basis, and authorities resolved the incidents by addressing them with the notarial office director.

The notary service issued birth certificates to minority religious community members, but not marriage certificates, according to the president of the National Islamic Council. Members of non-Catholic religious groups had the option to marry in a civil ceremony witnessed by a notary public, according to a Ministry of Justice official. Registrations of births and marriages with the government continued to be available, but civil registration rates remained relatively low in comparison to registration for religious certificates. Protestant and Muslim leaders continued to engage the Offices of the President and Prime Minister as well as

parliament to recognize non-Catholic certificates. In November 2020, Minister of Justice Manuel Carceres da Costa presented options to the Council of Ministers to amend the civil code to register all forms of marriages recognized by the law, including those of non-Catholic religious groups. These proposed revisions remained pending approval by the Council of Ministers at year's end.

Muslim religious leaders continued to express concerns about discriminatory practices in civil service hiring. They said some Muslim job candidates whose names might be identified with their religion experienced discrimination during the screening process.

As part of its annual budget, the Office of the Prime Minister allocated \$15 million to the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Timor-Leste for distribution among 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 groups, according to minority religious leaders, who said the funding significantly favored the Catholic Church, since non-Catholic religious groups needed to apply for funding from a separate source instead of receiving a dedicated budget allocation. Catholics and all other religious groups could apply, along with other organizations, for part of a separate \$6 million government fund set aside for civil society organizations during the year.

In September, the Civil Society Support Office under the Prime Minister's office signed a \$110,000 grant agreement with ATR-TL, the newly established, multireligious association launched in October, to conduct a nondenominational nationwide survey of faith-based tourism assets and to promote hospitality and tour guide training for young people. The Civil Society Support Office also provided a \$250,000 grant to the Muslim community in September to support their religious activities and education. A Protestant church received nearly \$170,000 in grant money to build a church in Viqueque while a separate Protestant church received more than \$67,000 to construct a church on Atauro island.

National holidays include several Catholic and Islamic holidays. On Eid al-Adha, President Francisco Guterres Lu Olo offered congratulations to the Muslim community and used the opportunity to encourage the Muslim community in this celebration to continue to uphold the values of "solidarity, generosity, and charity" to their "vulnerable compatriots." He stated these values were important to national and social cohesion to bring the citizenry together as one.

The government continued to consult religious leaders as part of broader engagement with civil society, including on the impact of COVID-19-related restrictions on religious activities.

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

Leaders of the Catholic Church and Protestant and Muslim communities reported continued positive cooperation and relations among religious groups. An interfaith group continued working to identify religious tourism sites and to raise awareness of these sites' religious and historical significance. On October 12, the anniversary of Pope John Paul II's visit to the country in 1989, the group launched the ATR-TL with an event at Dili Cathedral to promote tourism to religious sites and advance religious tolerance.

Members of minority religious groups, including from the Muslim and Protestant communities, generally reported there was religious tolerance in the country. However, some said strong societal pressure for individuals to remain in the Catholic Church persisted. Some minority religious group leaders stated that family and community members criticized their members because of their religious beliefs.

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

Embassy officials engaged regularly on religious issues with government officials, including from the Office of the Prime Minister, addressing concerns such as discrimination in civil service hiring, recognition of religious minority documentation, and budget allocations to different minority groups. The Ambassador met with religious and social leaders, including the Archbishop of Dili, the Imam of Dili, the late Bishop of Baucau, and Protestant leaders, among others.

The embassy continued to fund programs to promote religious freedom and the preservation of religious sites. For example, U.S. government programs continued to support a public-private partnership to attract investment to maintain Cristo Rei, a famous statue of Jesus located in Dili. It also continued to support the registration, capacity building, and launch of ATR-TL.