TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO 2021 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. According to the secretary of the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), an interfaith coordinating committee representing approximately 27 religious groups, the 2018 application by the National Council of Orisha Elders of Trinidad and Tobago for government recognition of the Orisha religion remained pending. The Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) received six religiously based discrimination complaints during the year, compared with eight in 2020. In May, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government implemented a state of emergency, which included limitations on religious gatherings. Religious leaders criticized the restrictions, with IRO members stating that more consultation was needed, especially since businesses were allowed to operate with fewer restrictions. Health Minister Terrence Deyalsingh criticized the actions of some Christian groups that urged their members and followers to refuse to take the COVID-19 vaccine. Various Christian groups reacted negatively to the health minister's vaccine comment, stating his criticism was too broad. The IRO, which received private and public funding, publicly endorsed the COVID-19 vaccine and called upon the health minister and the government to publicly identify the individual religious groups advocating vaccine refusal rather than refer to them in broad terms as members of the Christian faith. Several Hindu groups called on the government to repeal its prohibition on open-pyre cremation for COVID-19 decedents, stating that there was no scientific basis for the ban and citing the "harsh, oppressive and disproportionate" burden it placed on Hindu families. Orisha, Spiritual/Shouter Baptist, and Hindu leaders said the government's closure of beaches, rivers, streams, and ponds – part of the COVID-19 restrictions – was disruptive to their religious practices. Prime Minister Keith Rowley issued public messages for major religious holidays, underscoring religious freedom, diversity, and unity.

In June, the IRO appointed Hindu Pandit Lloyd Mukran Sirjoo as its new president. 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, such as COVID-19 policies, education, tolerance, and respect for the law. IRO members continued to ask their religious communities to open their doors to support refugees and migrants affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The IRO continued to advocate for religious tolerance, urged religious groups to support the government's efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, and encouraged everyone to get the vaccine "for the common good."

U.S. embassy officials engaged the government, including the EOC, on the importance of religious freedom and tolerance for religious diversity. The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials continued outreach with religious leaders. The embassy hosted meetings throughout the year to discuss COVID-19's impact on the religious community, government policy in support of religious freedom, vaccine hesitancy among various religious groups, religious pluralism, interfaith cooperation, discrimination, and religious tolerance among nonmember and member representatives of the IRO. The embassy funded programs in support of interfaith communication and cooperation and 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 2021). According to the 2011 local census, the most recent, 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. For the 2000-11 census period, Pentecostal churches were the fastest growing religious group, registering a 108 percent increase in affiliation. Traditional Caribbean religious groups with African roots include Spiritual/Shouter Baptists, who represent 5.7 percent of the population, and Orisha, who incorporate elements of West African Yoruba spiritualism and Shango, 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 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 demonstrate they are victims of religious discrimination. Claimants may also appeal a court's decision.

Possession and use of up to 30 grams (one ounce) of marijuana are legal, but the consumption of marijuana is illegal in public spaces. The law also provides a pathway for removing prior marijuana convictions from a person's criminal record, including 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, have operated 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.

Approximately 75 percent of established public and private schools in the country are religiously affiliated. Signed into law in 1960, a state-church agreement, or concordat, was established between the state and religious bodies sponsoring public schools in the country. The government subsidizes religiously affiliated public schools, including schools operated by Christian, Hindu, and Muslim groups. Religiously affiliated public schools, also called "assisted" or "denominational" schools, receive a combination of government and private funding. 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. The government contributes two-thirds of capital costs to construct and expand assisted schools, with the religious bodies retaining ownership and managerial responsibilities.

The concordat grants denominational school boards the right to determine their curricula and forbids the government from imposing books or apparatus to which the denominational authority formally objects. The rights of teacher appointments, transfers, and retention rest with the Public Service Commission, but the agreement permits the denominational boards of each school to approve or reject appointments based on moral or religious grounds.

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 of 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.

Schools receiving government assistance are required to admit a minimum of 80 percent of students based solely on their Secondary Entrance Assessment performance and have discretion to admit the remaining 20 percent according to their own criteria. 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 or assisted school.

No child older than two months of age is permitted to enter a nursery, preschool, or primary school without first being immunized or starting the immunization process. The COVID-19 vaccine, however, is not one of the required vaccines. 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 may homeschool them as an alternative to public education. A parent interested in homeschooling must submit 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 the cost of TTD 500 ($74) per year. Missionaries may not remain longer than three years per visit but may reenter after one year's absence.

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

Government Practices

According to the secretary of the IRO, the National Council of Orisha Elders of Trinidad and Tobago continued to wait for the government to recognize the Orisha religious group. The group submitted its registration application to the government in 2018, and it was still pending at year's end. Other religious leaders expressed concerns with the slow pace of government action in processing administrative filings or applications, which they reported was also a problem before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The EOC reported six religiously based discrimination complaints were filed during the year, compared with eight in 2020. Four of the complaints, from both the public and private sectors, were employment-related. According to the report, cases involved a Spiritual Baptist, a Hindu, and an atheist.

In May, to curtail the spread of the COVID-19 virus, PM Rowley declared a state of emergency, which shuttered many "nonessential" business, all places of worship, and imposed an overnight curfew. The 90-day measure received broad support from most religious leaders. Parliament granted an extension of the state of emergency for an additional three months, into November. Most religious leaders also expressed support for the extension and agreed congregants needed to be vaccinated for the successful reopening of places of worship.

Between September and November, Rowley gradually relaxed restrictions until the state of emergency expired on November 17. He advised, however, that public health ordinances would remain in force. These ordinances included limits on gatherings and the wearing of masks. Attendance at religious worship services was increased to 50 percent capacity, and funerals, weddings, and christenings had the same 50 percent capacity limitation, but gravesite gatherings were limited to 25 persons. Pools were opened to vaccinated patrons, but rivers, streams, ponds, springs, and beaches remained closed. Some religious officials expressed disappointment, stating that the public's access to beaches, rivers, stream, ponds, and springs was important to mental and physical health and integral to worship rites, rituals, and practices of various religious communities, including Hindu, Orisha, and Spiritual/Shouter Baptists. On December 25, PM Rowley announced that beaches would reopen daily from 5 a.m. to 12 p.m. but rivers, lakes, ponds, and springs would remain closed.

Responding to lower than expected COVID-19 vaccine acceptance rates, Health Minister Deyalsingh criticized the actions of some Christian groups that publicly urged their members and followers to refuse the vaccine. In a September media interview, the minister stated, "When we talk to people and do our surveys, the bulk of people who seem to be vaccine hesitant are of the Christian faith." Multiple Christian leaders condemned or expressed disappointment with his statement. Seventh-day Adventist Pastor Clive Dottin said he found the statement shocking. "We all know there is a linkage between race, religion, class, and politics in this country," he said.

Prominent religious figures, the IRO, and the government promoted vaccination efforts. Several religious figures and organizations, however, publicly called upon

their followers to refuse the COVID-19 vaccine. In March, Lincoln Doughty, leader of the El Shaddai Deliverance Ministry, led his congregation out on the streets without masks to "pray for the nation" and wished a COVID-19 death upon the police officers confronting him. His behavior was condemned by the IRO president, and the El Shaddai Deliverance Ministry was disassociated from the Trinidad and Tobago Council of Evangelical Churches. Head of the council Reverend Desmond Austin noted "with alarm the attitudes of various individuals purporting to be Christians in videos posted on social media, which were not in alignment with the Word of God or reflective of the Christian Community."

In August, TT Response, a Pentecostal Christian nongovernmental organization (NGO), which was not a member of the IRO and reportedly was not seeking membership, broadcast a conference on Zoom and Facebook hosted by the bishop of the Redemption Christian Centre in which various speakers rebuked the World Health Organization and the pharmaceutical industry, rejected government directives and limitations on religious gatherings, demanded the government implement Ivermectin treatments for COVID-19, and linked vaccine implementation to a spike in COVID-19 deaths. The conference was shared widely on social media, and other Pentecostal churches made similar statements.

In September, PM Rowley encouraged those who were refusing to take the vaccine to consider how their actions were threatening those around them. Pentecostal groups condemned the comments of the Prime Minister. Bishop Victor Gill, president of TT Response, called on the Prime Minister to clarify his comments, stating, "Mr. Prime Minister, are you saying to this nation, to the private sector, that it is OK to fire its employees if they refuse to vaccinate?" PM Rowley responded to criticism at a media briefing and stated in general terms that choices have consequences.

In August, several large Hindu organizations wrote to the Minister of Health and Chief Medical Officer, calling for them to discontinue a ban on open-pyre cremations for COVID-19 decedents. A group of 13 NGOs and religious organizations, including the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, SWAHA International, Arya Pratindhi Sabha of Trinidad, Hindu Women's Organisation of Trinidad and Tobago, Hindu Swayam Sevak Sangh, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, issued a joint statement declaring the prohibition "culturally and religiously insensitive," as well as "harsh, oppressive, and disproportionate." They acknowledged the need for COVID restrictions but objected to measures not backed by scientific evidence, stating, "We dutifully accept and recognize that restrictive measures may be necessary to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

However, any measure which interferes with religious beliefs and entrenched cultural norms must be properly justified and supported with a compelling scientific basis."

Also in August, an appeals court judge refused permission to the daughter of a COVID-19 patient to cremate her father's remains in an open-air pyre cremation, in accordance with Hindu tradition. Justice of Appeal Malcolm Holdip denied Cindy-Ann Ramsaroop-Persad's application to include the Ministry of Health in her challenge of the guidelines for funeral agencies that banned open-air pyre cremations for COVID-19 decedents. His ruling relied in part on a Canadian opinion (*Beaudoin v. British Columbia 2021*); he stated, "I have found guidance from this case, which speaks to no fault of government officials in implementing health and safety protocols and guidelines during a pandemic where there is an outbreak of an infectious disease. There is no constitutional breach of an individual's religious rights." Holdip granted Ramsaroop-Persad's appeal requesting an urgent and expedited hearing.

On November 22, the Court of Appeal overturned Holdip's decision. The court stated the prohibition infringed upon the religious beliefs of a significant segment of the population and remitted the case to the High Court, stipulating the review should receive priority. The open-air cremation did not take place and at year's end the case remained pending with the High Court.

The government limited the number of long-term foreign missionaries to 35 per registered religious group; however, the limits were not a constraint due to the pandemic and the closure of the borders for almost 16 months. Missionaries in excess of the 35 individuals allowed could remain in the country for a maximum of 30 days. 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.

There were reports that because of the highly competitive nature of admission to assisted schools, parents continued to scrutinize the discretionary 20 percent admission policy in the concordat and that some parents opted to change their child's religion based upon the denomination of their desired school.

Courts continued to uphold the religious rights of students over strict conformance to school dress codes. Students successfully challenged schools and the

government on the right to wear the hijab, *rakhi*, or longer hair as a religious observance over the school's rights to enforce school uniform policies.

Members of the government and political party officials continued to participate in, and mark ceremonies and holidays of, the various religious groups and emphasized religious tolerance and harmony in their virtual remarks. PM Rowley issued public messages for Easter, Corpus Christi, and Ramadan, underscoring religious freedom, diversity, unity, and the religious community's role in helping the less fortunate. In his Ramadan message, he said, "To the national community, I say let us all try to emulate these precious teachings of Ramadan in our lives. The Muslim community continues to be a source of inspiration in its drive towards helping the less fortunate. In our current COVID-19 reality, this is needed even more than ever."

In his Corpus Christi message, PM Rowley asked the public to follow COVID-19 protocols, saying, "Let us, as a people, also adhere to the word "Discipline" in our National Watchwords, and follow the protocols of the Ministry of Health, so we can all boast soon that our country is COVID-19 controlled on our way to becoming COVID-free. The control of this virus is in our individual hands. Just as Christ had his mission on earth, every citizen should accept his/her individual responsibility in following the healthcare regulations, to counter the spread of this virus. The COVID-19 virus is everyone's business, and each one must do his or her part in winning this war."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In June, the IRO appointed a Hindu pandit as its new president. The IRO, which included Christian denominations as well as Islamic, Hindu, Orisha, and Baha'i groups, continued to advocate for matters of religious and social concern, such as COVID policies, education, tolerance, and respect for the law. IRO members continued to ask their religious communities to open their doors to support refugees and migrants and those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The IRO stated in August that many of its members were vaccinated, and the organization encouraged everyone to "get with the times" and take the vaccine.

In October, the Catholic Archdiocese of Port of Spain announced that religious clergy, choir members, priests, and those dealing with the public would be fully vaccinated. Archbishop Jason Gordon criticized those who ignored government mandates or religious leaders who claimed that their faith alone would protect

them from COVID-19: “Our tradition is that you don’t put God to the test... You don’t stand up on a cliff and jump because you’re a man of God.” In his statement, he asked members to not to rely on the “echo chambers” of social media in feeding and spreading misinformation about the virus or the vaccine.

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 and underscored the role of religious leaders in addressing vaccine hesitancy.

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials continued virtual outreach with religious leaders. On April 29, the Charge d’Affaires hosted a virtual iftar, which included members of the government, opposition, and NGOs. In September, the embassy hosted a virtual meeting with the newly appointed president and members of the IRO to discuss interfaith cooperation and religious tolerance among nonmember and member representatives of the IRO, as well as the impact of COVID-19 on the religious community.

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

The embassy posted content on its social media platforms that promoted religious freedom and tolerance. It also hosted virtual events centered on vaccine hesitancy among religious communities that included representatives from the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian faiths.

The embassy provided a grant to We Say Y.E.S., a multifaith NGO, to implement projects promoting trust and cooperation among religious and cultural groups in the country and to increase community resilience in confronting violent extremism, gender-based violence, and interfaith cooperation. The initiative aimed at addressing violence between Rasta City and the Muslim City gangs in East Port of Spain neighborhoods by bringing grassroots, multifaith leaders together to form positive relationships with the community, reinforce commonalities, promote religious tolerance, and demonstrate to at-risk youth how leaders of varying faiths can work together. The group hosted Cordial Conversations, an eight-week program aimed at promoting conversations between different religious groups and East Port of Spain communities, and it established a working group that met to discuss community initiatives aimed at resolving conflicts and promoting shared

interests. They remained engaged in their projects throughout the pandemic through virtual programming and limited in-person sessions.

In November, the Charge d'Affaires and embassy officials met with members of the IRO at the al-Tawbah Mosque in Tobago. He thanked religious leaders for their support and collaboration with the United States on addressing matters of religious freedom.