

SURINAME 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion. Both the constitution and the penal code prohibit discrimination based on religion. Any violation may be brought before a court of justice. Religious groups seeking financial support from the government must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Limited government financial support for religious groups remained available through the Ministry of Home Affairs, primarily as stipends for clergy. The government continued to pay wages for teachers and support staff of schools managed by religious groups, as well as subsidize their operational costs and school supplies. The government consulted with religious groups on proposed amendments to legislation, including on same-sex marriage. President Chankapersad Santokhi and other officials emphasized the country's religious diversity and the importance of respect for that diversity during public speeches. The President's Office hosted multiple events commemorating different religious holidays, highlighting the country's religious diversity and tolerance, including a multidenominational prayer in honor of National Day of Fellowship and Unity.

Members of the Interreligious Council (IRIS), a body encompassing two Hindu groups, two Muslim groups, and the Roman Catholic Church, continued to meet to discuss interfaith activities as well as the impact of government policies on society. IRIS collaborated with the Committee for Christian Churches (CCK) and nonmember religious groups on efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance.

In meetings with government representatives, U.S. embassy officials highlighted U.S. government policy on the importance of protecting religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador participated in events hosted by the government commemorating different religious holidays and highlighting religious freedom and diversity. In September, the Ambassador visited the Jodensavane, a historic Jewish site supported by the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, where she emphasized the site's uniqueness as the first independent Jewish settlement in the Americas. In August, embassy officials visited the mosque of the Suriname Islamic Association (SIV) and met with its leaders to discuss religious freedom. In

December, a senior Department of State official delivered remarks during a meeting with IRIS members on the topic of religious freedom. He also visited the SIV mosque and the adjoining Neveh Shalom Synagogue, where he discussed with Muslim and Jewish leaders the country's model of religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 633,000 (midyear 2022). According to the 2012 census, the most recent available, approximately half of the population is Christian (26 percent Protestant, 22 percent Catholic, and 3 percent other Christian). Christian groups include Moravian, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, Baptist, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Hindus are 22 percent of the population, including the Sanatan Dharm and the Arya Dewaker. Muslims, including Sunni and Ahmadi Muslims and the World Islamic Call Society, are 14 percent. The remaining 13 percent include Baha'is, Jews, Buddhists, Brahma Kumaris, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and three Rastafarian organizations: the Aya Bingi Order, 12th Tribe, and Bobo Shanti.

Some Amerindian and Maroon populations, approximately 3 percent of the population, adhere to indigenous religions. Certain Amerindian groups, concentrated principally in the interior and to a lesser extent in coastal areas, practice shamanism through a *piaiman* (medicine man). Many Maroons, descendants of Africans who fled Dutch colonial plantations, worship nature. Persons of Amerindian and Maroon origin who identify as Christian often combine Christian practices with Indigenous religious customs. Some Creoles in urban areas, as well as some Maroons, worship their ancestors through a rite called *wintie*.

There is some overlap between ethnicity and religion. Hinduism is primarily linked to descendants of East Indian immigrants, while Islam is practiced by members of the same immigrant group, as well as by Javanese and Creoles. Christianity crosses all ethnic backgrounds.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states that everyone has freedom of religion, and individuals may not be discriminated against on the grounds of religion. Individuals may choose to change their religion. Any violation of religious freedom may be brought before a court of justice.

The penal code provides punishment for those who instigate hate or discrimination against persons based on religion or creed in any way. Those found guilty may be sentenced to a prison term of no longer than one year and a fine of up to 25,000 Surinamese dollars (SRD) (\$788). In cases where an insult or act of hatred is instigated by more than one person, as part of an organization, or by a person who makes such statements habitually or as part of work, the punishment may include imprisonment of up to two years and fines of up to SRD 50,000 (\$1,600).

Religious groups must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs only if they seek financial support, including stipends for clergy, from the government. Registering with the ministry does not confer tax benefits. To register, religious groups must supply contact information, a history of their group, and addresses for houses of worship. Most religious groups are officially registered.

The law does not permit religious instruction in public schools, and the government prohibits prayer groups in public schools. Private schools managed by religious groups include religious instruction in the curriculum. All students attending schools run by religious groups must take part in religious instruction, regardless of their religious background. Laws and government decrees do not permit parents to homeschool children for religious reasons.

The government funds salaries for all teachers and support staff in primary and junior secondary schools established and managed by various religious groups. Additionally, the schools receive a subsidy for their operational costs based on the number of students. The government also provides 90 percent of funding for books and other materials. Religious groups must provide the remaining funding, which includes construction costs, funding for school furniture, supplies, and additional maintenance expenses. Religious organizations administer approximately 50 percent of primary (ages 4-12) and junior secondary (ages 12-

16) schools in the country. Religious organizations do not administer higher secondary schools (ages 16-19). The Catholic Diocese of Paramaribo, Moravian Church, and Hindu community administer most private schools. Through the Ministries of Education and Finance, the government provides a fee per registered child and pays teacher salaries to the religious organizations administering these schools.

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

Government Practices

According to the Ministry of Social Affairs, budget constraints and the Ministry of Finance's lengthy processes continued to hamper the government's capacity to meet its payment obligations to homes for children as well as the elderly administered by religious organizations. According to religious organizations, the limited funding the government did provide arrived late and had to be supplemented by the different organizations. The government, through the Ministry of Education, continued its subsidies to schools managed by religious organizations at the same level as prior years. Religious organizations reported that the funds they did receive for maintenance of schools was far from sufficient and led to the deterioration of school buildings because they were unable to fund maintenance from their own budgets. The government prohibited schools receiving public funds, including religious schools, from increasing school fees for the 2022-23 school year.

The armed forces continued to maintain a staff chaplaincy with Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic clergy available to military personnel.

The Religious Affairs Department of the Ministry of Home Affairs continued to support different religious groups by providing stipends to all registered clergy, which number several hundred from across all religions.

According to government officials and IRIS leaders, the government collaborated with IRIS and the CCK, the latter comprising the Catholic Church, the Moravian Church, the Lutheran Church, and evangelical Christian Churches, on implementation of elements of its economic recovery program aimed at combatting poverty.

The government allocated SRD 26 million (\$820,000) of the budget to the economic recovery program it launched in May. In May and June, IRIS and the CCK provided support to 5,000 families through vouchers, direct cash, or food packages. Recipients did not have to be members of any religious group to apply for support. A representative of the Ministry of Finance said the government chose IRIS and the CCK as partners because of their existing networks and their cost-effective implementation mechanisms.

During the year, the government consulted with different religious groups and organizations on proposed amendments to the country's civil code. For example, the government consulted with religious leaders on changes to the civil code that would allow same-sex marriage, changes that IRIS said its religious groups would not support. Religious groups associated with IRIS and the CCK provided comments, suggested changes, and advised the government on the potential impact of proposed amendments.

A program on standardizing and formally recognizing religious training launched by the Religious Affairs Department of the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2021 continued, with the addition of the involvement of the Ministry of Education. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, formal recognition of religious training programs and their standardization would allow the ministry to set stipends for clergy under the government wage system. During the year, clergy received training through their respective organizations.

Government officials continued to raise the importance of religious freedom, respect for religious diversity, and their commitment to protecting religious minorities through public statements, attendance at religious events, and hosting events in honor of various religious holidays. President Santokhi and other government officials emphasized the country's religious diversity and the importance of respect for that diversity during public speeches. During the year, the President's Office hosted events in commemoration of various religious holidays, including a September multid denominational prayer in honor of National Day of Fellowship and Unity. In October, during the celebration of the Hindu holiday Sri Shiv Parthiv Pujan Samaroh, the President stated, "In difficult times people draw strength from their religious values and beliefs, and Suriname is in the fortunate position to have multiple religions to draw from."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

IRIS continued to discuss interfaith activities and positions on government policies and their impact on society. IRIS collaborated with nonmember religious organizations such as the CCK on efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance. In January, representatives of different religious organizations, as well as the Ministry of Home Affairs, collaborated on an event that the Baha'i Faith community organized in honor of World Religion Day.

Leaders of the SIV mosque noted the general respect that individuals in the country have for each other's religion. During a December discussion on religious freedom, representatives of different religious groups reinforced the mutual respect for each other's religions, adding that "for Surinamers, it is normal." Representatives from both the SIV mosque and the adjoining Neveh Shalom Synagogue reiterated their friendship and the general respect in the country for religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials highlighted U.S. government policy on the importance of protection of religious freedom in meetings with government officials, including during the Chargé d'Affaires's meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs in December. During the year, the Ambassador participated in different events hosted by the government that highlighted the country's multireligious culture and promoted religious freedom and tolerance.

In September, the Ambassador visited the Jodensavane, a historic Jewish site supported by the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, where she emphasized the site's uniqueness as the first independent Jewish settlement in the Americas. In August, embassy officials visited the SIV's mosque and met with its leaders to discuss religious freedom. In December, a senior Department of State official visited the country and delivered remarks on U.S. respect for religious freedom during a meeting with members of IRIS. The official stated, "U.S. respect for religious freedom is a basic principle that does not depend on the nature of government." He also visited the SIV mosque and adjoining Neveh Shalom Synagogue, where he discussed the country's religious tolerance and diversity with their leaders.

The embassy posted messages of greetings on all religious holidays on Facebook, the country's primary social media platform.