

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO 2022 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. 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. Religious groups must register with the government to receive tax-exempt donations or gifts of land, perform marriages, or receive visas for foreign missionaries. The Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC), established by law as an independent body, is charged with eliminating discrimination by investigating and resolving complaints through conciliation and developing education programs.

In April, during Ramadan, a group of Muslims accused police of desecrating a tent functioning as a makeshift *masjid* (mosque), allegedly throwing Qurans on the ground, dumping food prepared for the evening, and assaulting members of the group while searching for a suspect accused of killing a police officer. In January, the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, the largest Hindu organization in the country, proceeded with its lawsuit against the government over its ban on open-pyre cremation for COVID-19 decedents that numerous Hindu groups had said were “harsh, oppressive, and disproportionate.” Later in January, a government team that included Prime Minister Keith Rowley, the Ministers of Health and National Security, and the chief medical officer met with the leadership of the Maha Sabha, and both parties agreed on a resolution to the dispute. The secretary of the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) reported that a 2018 application by the National Council of Orisha Elders of Trinidad and Tobago for government recognition of the Orisha religion remained pending at year’s end. In June, the new Tobago House of Assembly (THA) Chief Secretary Farley Augustine convened an inaugural Tobago Interfaith Council and appointed Imam Kameal Ali as its interim chairman.

During the year, the EOC received five religion-based discrimination complaints, compared with six in 2021. Hindus, Muslims, and Christians noted widespread

cases of vandalism, desecration, and looting of temples, mosques and churches throughout the year. The numerous attacks on religious sites prompted condemnations from across society. The IRO, which includes Christian denominations as well as Islamic, Hindu, Orisha, and Baha'i groups, continued to play a role in promoting dialogue to prevent and resolve misunderstandings between religious groups amid acts of violence and desecration against places of worship.

U.S. embassy officials engaged the government, including the EOC, on the importance of religious freedom and tolerance for religious diversity. The Chargé d'Affaires (Chargé) and other embassy officials continued outreach with religious leaders, hosting events during the month of Ramadan, Diwali, and other religious holidays and visiting houses of worship and temples to discuss matters of religious and social concern.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.4 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2011 local census, the most recent, 26.5 percent of the population are Protestant, 21.6 percent Roman Catholic, 18.2 percent Hindu, 5 percent Muslim, and 1.5 percent Jehovah's Witnesses. For the 2000-2011 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 Seventh-day Adventists, 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. There is also a small community of followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, with parishes in Port of Spain, Arouca, and San Fernando. The population of Tobago is 85 percent of African descent and predominantly Christian. Persons of East Indian descent, who are predominantly followers of Islam or Catholicism, and Christians of European descent make up the rest of Tobago's population.

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 (\$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 the 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. According to the concordat, assisted or denominational schools (public schools that are religiously affiliated) are required to admit 80 percent of students based upon the results of the country's Secondary Entrance Examination, while the remaining 20 percent are admitted at each denominational board's discretion. The government subsidizes religiously affiliated public schools, including schools operated by Christian, Hindu, and Muslim groups. "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 or assisted school.

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 500 Trinidad and Tobago dollars (\$75) 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

In April, during the month of Ramadan, a Muslim group accused police of desecrating a tent functioning as a makeshift mosque. Members of the group alleged police entered without proper warrants and without removing their shoes, threw Qurans on the ground, destroyed food prepared for the evening meal, and assaulted members of the group while searching for a suspect accused of killing a police officer. One of the members stated, “The police officers came into the tents with their shoes on and overturned everything in search of what and who we don’t know. All they said, they were looking for a man in connection with the shooting of the police officer. The officers said they don’t care about our place of worship, but I know they wouldn’t have gone to other places of worship to do what they did. We have videos and pictures and are taking it up with our attorneys.” Acting Commissioner of Police McDonald Jacob stated, “The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service respects all religious groups in Trinidad and Tobago ... [If] persons are aggrieved because of the alleged incident, they should report the matter and an investigation will be launched into the alleged incident.” The group appealed to the Police Complaints Authority to launch an independent investigation into the incident. According to media reports, police investigated the incident and determined the search was a cover-up for the accidental killing of an officer by another officer.

In a July 15 editorial, the daily newspaper *Guardian Media* called on the government to do more to protect religious institutions from criminal elements, stating, “While many places of worship are dependent on the goodwill of the congregation and their members and cannot afford round-the-clock security, perhaps the time may have come for a partnership between the State and religious bodies to ensure the safety and security at these sites are maintained and preserved. With places of worship no longer spared from crime, a strong message must be sent to all criminals petty and serious that there is no room in this country for their wicked ways.”

In January, the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, the largest Hindu organization in the country, proceeded with its civil case before the High Court challenging the government’s ban on open-pyre cremations for COVID-19 decedents. Together with 13 other Hindu organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society groups, they appealed to the Ministry of Health, noting the ban lacked scientific foundation, and they said funeral homes charged excessively high prices for facilitating indoor cremation. A few weeks before the court date, a

government team including Prime Minister Keith Rowley, the Attorney General, the Ministers of Health and National Security, and the chief medical officer met with the leadership of the Maha Sabha to discuss a resolution. The government agreed to consult with the organization before issuing new guidelines, and the Maha Sabha agreed to withdraw its lawsuit; these actions resolved the situation. In January, Attorney General Faris Al-Rawi announced the repeal of the ban and the issuance of new, agreed-upon guidelines, including no more than 25 persons at the cremation site for each funeral, the sealing of the casket or container of the COVID-19 victim, and collecting the ashes the following morning in accordance with Hindu traditions. Responding to the agreement reached with the government, Vijay Maharaj, the Maha Sabha General Secretary, noted strong interfaith support from prominent Muslims and Christians and stated, "I feel we have been justified in stating that our rights and rituals have to be adhered to. We have a place in Trinidad and Tobago and we should be treated fairly and be heard fairly. I think it's not only the Hindu community but other communities who feel and understand that this unfairness."

According to the secretary of the IRO, an interfaith coordinating committee representing approximately 27 religious groups, 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 with the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs. Other religious leaders expressed concern with the slow pace of government action in processing administrative filings and applications, land permits, and missionary permits, which, they reported, was also a problem before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government limited the number of long-term foreign missionaries to 35 per registered religious group; however, two religious groups noted difficulties and delays of almost six months in obtaining missionary permits. Missionaries that numbered more than the 35 individuals allowed per group 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 elite assisted schools, parents continued to question the discretionary 20 percent admission policy in the concordat, stating the policy unfairly favored students of wealthy parents who could afford to make donations to an elite school's endowment and that some parents opted to change their child's religion based on the denomination of their desired school.

Courts continued to uphold the religious rights of students in favor of strict conformance to school dress codes. Students successfully challenged schools and the government on the right to wear the hijab, *rakhi* (a bracelet made of interwoven red and gold threads), or longer hair as a religious observance, as opposed to the school's right to enforce school uniform policies.

In May, the new THA Chief Secretary Farley Augustine addressed Eid celebrations at the Masjid al-Tawbah in Lowlands, Tobago, and praised Tobago's Muslim community for its contributions to the island. He emphasized that Trinbagonians should not take their religious liberties for granted, noting that Hindus, Christians, and Muslims break bread together in the country, something that does not happen in many places.

In June, the THA Chief Secretary convened an inaugural Tobago Faith-Based Council and appointed Imam Kameal Ali as its interim chairman. The council met twice a month with representatives of the THA to discuss issues important to the religious community and to coordinate humanitarian outreach.

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. Prime Minister Rowley issued public messages for Easter, Corpus Christi, and Ramadan, highlighting the end of most COVID-19 restrictions and underscoring religious freedom, diversity, unity, and the religious community's role in addressing increased violence.

In his Easter message, the Prime Minister asked the public to protect national unity and harmony, saying, "During this sacred time, let us extend a helping hand to those who are in need. Let us emulate Christ's humility and truly demonstrate what it means to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We live in one of the

most successful multi-ethnic and multicultural societies in the world. We must guard this harmony zealously. There is no room in our country for divisive language and behavior. We must never allow the seeds of discord to be planted here. Those who cultivate such evil, reap a veritable whirlwind of hate and damaging consequences.”

In marking Diwali, Prime Minister Rowley said, “I appeal to the nation to use instances, like our Diwali celebrations, to strengthen and build new bridges, across the diversity we have celebrated for generations past. Fellow citizens, Diwali is about bringing light to the darkness of today’s challenging conditions. My appeal to every citizen of this nation today is to, please, even in these most difficult times, endeavor to bring light into your lives, then we will all see the real meaning and essence of our world and God’s divinity as lit by the humble *deyas* (a type of lamp used during Diwali).”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On August 17, assailants broke into the Catholic church in San Rafael, tying up the parish priest, looting the church, and stealing his personal vehicle. In discussing the incident with media, Catholic vicar general Martin Sirju lamented the country’s record homicide rate and spiraling violent crime and urged his followers to look out for each other noting, “Let us be our brothers’ keepers.” Responding to the incident, Archbishop Jason Gordon addressed members on his Facebook page, writing, “I want to extend condolences to all who have lost loved ones in recent days, especially through violent crime. Let us pray for our country, for our protective services, and for the conversion of hearts.”

On April 23, as parishioners gathered for afternoon Mass, two men entered the St. Francis Roman Catholic Church’s pastoral center in Belmont, vandalized the building and religious statues, and damaged parked cars. The incident reportedly caused thousands of dollars in damage and was quickly condemned by Acting Archbishop Esau Joseph, who said the attack infringed upon the constitutional right to worship. Authorities arrested and charged the alleged perpetrators.

According to media reports, on May 5, assailants vandalized the Hindu Carapo Shiv Temple, looted valuables, and desecrated it by cooking corned beef with utensils used to prepare vegetarian foods. The president of the temple, Naresh

Teemu, condemned the incident, stating that the use of the product made with beef, considered sacred to Hindus, was a hate crime and a deliberate provocation. While various Hindu groups cited the incident as a blatant example of anti-Hindu sentiment and called for “swift karma” to the perpetrators, IRO President Pandit Mukesh Sirjoo appealed for calm. He stated, “Whoever is the culprit, we cannot jump to conclusions. There are various aspects of what could be happening here. The matter must be investigated thoroughly and properly.” As news of the incident spread, the temple’s management and devotees received an outpouring of support from Hindus and non-Hindus.

In July, unknown thieves stole an iconic 153-year-old church bell from St. John’s Anglican Church in Trinidad. Investigators blamed the theft on thieves looking to cash in on its valuable metal content. One community member said of the theft, “Bells serve as a form of communication with the community surrounding the church, informing people of when services are taking place, funerals, weddings, and other events. It’s strong communication, a community sound because it is sentimental to people, some people would have grown up hearing it all the time. The bells have made significant notice to the community that there is a church here and worship is going on.”

Also in July, thieves broke into the Effectual Doors International Church in Couva, Trinidad, stealing money and valuables.

On September 28, during the Hindu holy days of Navratri, the Kali Mata Temple in Couva, Trinidad, was vandalized and desecrated, damaging the idol of Goddess Kali. Graffiti sprayed at the entrance to the temple said, “Read Exodus 20:3-4.”

In October, the Pentecostal Assemblies of the West Indies (PAWI,) which is not represented in the IRO, joined in solidarity with other religious groups in condemning violence and theft against places of worship throughout the country. The group stated, “These cowardly acts violate the rights of persons across the religious spectrum in Trinidad and Tobago and threaten our peaceful existence and tolerance for each other. PAWI unreservedly denounces such acts, not only as crimes against the various religious bodies, but against the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We continue to lend our prayerful support to the law enforcement agencies in bringing the perpetrators to justice. Members of our organization are

in no way instructed, directed, or incited to perform any such acts, and we categorically renounce, and distance ourselves from such behaviors.”

The EOC reported five religiously based discrimination complaints were filed during the year, compared with six in 2021. Five of the complaints, from both the public and private sectors, were employment-related. According to the report, cases involved a Seventh-day Adventist, a Hindu, and a nondenominational Christian.

The IRO, which includes Christian denominations as well as Islamic, Hindu, Orisha, and Baha’i groups, continued to advocate 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.

The Catholic Church’s Archdiocesan Ministry of Migrants and Refugees and the Living Water Community organized programs to assist migrants and refugees regardless of their religious backgrounds. Working with UNHCR and UNICEF, the church’s programs included emergency shelter, humanitarian and food assistance, and education programs for non-English speaking migrant and refugees who were ineligible to attend public or assisted schools in the country. According to local sources, the Catholic Board of Education Management played a prominent role in supporting the integration of migrant and refugee children into denominational schools at the primary level.

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 noted the role of religious leaders in preventing religious conflicts or misunderstandings and boosting community outreach.

The Chargé and other embassy officials continued outreach with religious leaders. On April 29, the Chargé hosted an iftar that included members of the government, the opposition, and NGOs. In October, the embassy hosted a virtual meeting with members of the IRO to discuss interfaith cooperation and the impacts of violence, theft, and desecration of places of worship across the

country. Members affirmed the importance of the IRO's consultations with the government on concerns of the religious community as a whole.

On May 2, embassy officials attended an Eid al-Fitr function in Trinidad with leaders from the Muslim community and discussed the community's role in interfaith engagement, tolerance, and issues of concern for the religious community.

In June, embassy officials met with representatives from the Catholic Church to recognize and discuss its programs to assist migrants and refugees. The U.S. government provided funding to the Catholic Archdiocese Ministry of Migrants and Refugees to support its programs.

In July, the Chargé and other embassy officials met with members of the new Tobago Interfaith Council at the al-Tawbah Mosque in Tobago. The Chargé thanked religious leaders for their support and collaboration with the United States in advancing religious freedom in the country.