

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The embassy continued an outreach program to various religious groups and included the Inter-Religious Organization in several official events.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the latest unofficial estimates (2006), 26 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 24.6 percent Protestant (including 7.8 percent Anglican, 6.8 percent Pentecostal, 4 percent Seventh-day Adventist, 3.3 percent Presbyterian or Congregational, 1.8 percent Baptist, and 0.9 percent Methodist), 1.6 percent Jehovah's Witnesses, 22.5 percent Hindu, and 5.8 percent Muslim. Traditional Caribbean religious groups with African roots include the Spiritual Baptists (sometimes called Shouter Baptists) representing 5.4 percent of the population and the Orisha at 0.1 percent. The remainder of the population is listed as "other," which includes a number of small Christian groups, as well as Baha'is, Rastafarians, Buddhists, and Jews.

Afro-Trinidadians are predominantly Christian, with a small Muslim community, and are concentrated in and around Port of Spain and the east-west corridor of northern Trinidad. The population of Trinidad's sister island, Tobago, is overwhelmingly of African descent and predominantly Christian. Indo-Trinidadians are primarily concentrated in central and southern Trinidad and are mostly Hindu, but also Muslim, Presbyterian and Catholic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

To receive tax-exempt donations or gifts of land, or to perform marriages, religious groups must register with the government, which requires them to demonstrate that they are nonprofit organizations. Religious groups have the same rights and obligations as most legal entities, regardless of whether they are registered. They may own land, but they must pay property taxes; they may hire employees, but they must pay government-mandated employee benefits. Some religious groups register their organizations for increased visibility and to attract wider membership.

The government subsidizes both nondenominational public schools and religiously affiliated public schools (for example, Catholic, Hindu, and Islamic). The government permits religious instruction in nondenominational public schools, allocating time each week when any religious organization with an adherent in the school may provide an instructor. Attendance at these classes is voluntary, and the religious groups represented are diverse. Parents may enroll their children in private schools for religious reasons. Homeschooling is not allowed, since the Education Act mandates formal schooling for all children either in public or private schools.

The Ministry of the People and Social Development is responsible for ecclesiastical affairs and administers annual financial grants to religious organizations. It also issues recommendations on land use by such organizations.

The law prohibits acts that would offend or insult another person or group on the basis of race, origin, or religion, or which would incite racial or religious hatred. The law also provides for prosecution for the desecration of any place of worship. Government officials routinely speak publicly against religious intolerance and do not publicly favor any religion. Judicial review is available to those who claim to be victims of religious discrimination.

Missionaries must meet standard requirements for an entry visa and must represent a religious organization registered according to the law. They may not remain more than three years per visit, but may reenter after a year's absence. The government limited the number of foreign missionaries to 35 per registered religious organization at any given time. Nonetheless, some international religious groups or denominations maintain more than 35 total missionaries in the country if they are affiliated with more than one registered organization, including registered nonprofits and charities.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, Corpus Christi, and Christmas; Diwali; and Eid al-Fitr. There is also a public holiday recognizing the repeal of colonial-era laws that prohibited the practice of the Shouter/ Spiritual Baptist faith. The government grants financial and technical assistance to various organizations to support religious celebrations.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

In August parliament declared a state of emergency pursuant to constitutional authority which was in effect until early December. The state of emergency was declared to respond to what was reported as a potentially destabilizing criminal threat. Some Muslim and Hindu groups complained that the accompanying curfew placed undue restrictions on movement during Ramadan and Diwali commemorations and celebrations. In response to some complaints from the Muslim community, the government shifted the start of curfew to better accommodate Ramadan events.

Muslims expressed concerns of bias and unlawful detention when sixteen men were arrested and detained without charge during the state of emergency in connection with what were described as plots to assassinate the Prime Minister and three other cabinet ministers. All sixteen arrested were Muslim, but each was eventually released without charge after being held for approximately one week.

The government does not formally sponsor programs that promote interfaith dialogue; however, it supports the activities of the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO). This organization is an interfaith coordinating committee for public outreach, governmental and media relations, and policy implementation. It also provides the prayer leader for several official events, such as the opening of Parliament and the annual court term. The bylaws of the IRO do not exclude any religious groups from membership. Pentecostals and Seventh-day Adventists did not participate for doctrinal reasons.

Cabinet ministers, members of parliament, and public figures represented every major religious group and denomination and the broad spectrum of religious beliefs in the country. They often participated in the ceremonies and holidays of other religions and actively advocated religious tolerance and harmony.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The embassy continued outreach to various religious groups, and included the Inter-Religious Organization in official events, including a commemoration and memorial service on the tenth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center attacks. The ambassador met with leaders of various religious organizations, and visited a number of religious services and sites.