

BELIZE

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.

U.S. embassy officers spoke regularly with government officials and religious leaders on issues affecting religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

Roman Catholics are the largest religious group, accounting for 40 percent of the population in 2010 according to the government census. Pentecostals are 9 percent of the population, Seventh-day Adventists 6 percent, Anglicans 5 percent, Mennonites 4 percent, Baptists 4 percent, Methodists 3 percent, members of the Church of the Nazarene 3 percent, and Jehovah's Witnesses 2 percent. Smaller religious groups include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Rastafarians, the Salvation Army, and the Baha'i Faith. Those stating they did not belong to any religious group constituted 15 percent of the population.

No religious group is a majority in any of the country's six districts. Catholics are found throughout the country. Mennonites and Pentecostals live mostly in the rural areas of the Cayo and Orange Walk districts, and members of other religious groups tend to be concentrated in Belize City.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

There is no state religion, but the preamble to the constitution states that “The nation...shall be founded upon principles which acknowledge the supremacy of God.” One of the 12 members of the Senate is appointed by the governor general acting in accordance with the advice of the Council of Churches and the Evangelical Association of Churches. The membership of these organizations includes the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches, the Salvation Army, the Chinese Christian Mission, the Chinese Christian Church, and the Seventh-day Adventists.

Under the constitution, freedom of religion is part of broader protections under freedom of conscience. The constitution provides that no one shall be compelled to take an oath that is contrary to a person’s religion or belief. The constitution reserves the right of the government to intervene in religious matters “for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedoms of other persons,” including the right to observe and practice any religion “without the unsolicited intervention of members of any other religion.” Discrimination on religious grounds is illegal.

Religious organizations and groups are required to register with the Companies Registry after paying a prescribed fee. Property taxes are not levied against churches and other places of worship, but other church-owned buildings occupied on a regular basis, such as the pastor’s or priest’s residence, are not exempt.

Foreign religious workers are permitted to enter the country and proselytize, but they must be registered and purchase a religious worker’s permit for a modest annual fee.

The constitution stipulates that religious communities may establish “places of education” and states that “no such community shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for persons of that community.” By statute, the educational system maintains a strong religious curriculum. The curriculum ties “spirituality” with social studies courses. The law provides for students in both public and church-run schools from kindergarten through sixth grade to receive one class period per week of religious instruction. Some schools, however, offer religion classes daily.

The constitution prohibits any educational institution from compelling a child to receive religious instruction or attend any religious ceremony or observance. Parents may object to, and students may abstain from, attending religious observances. Most primary and elementary schools, high schools, and colleges are church affiliated. Instances where administrators do not know the law or misapply

it are usually corrected as a result of parent-school consultations. There is no system in place that allows students to opt out of the religious elements of the curriculum. In rare cases, the Ministry of Education intervenes to correct a situation. Catholic holy days are routinely observed as school holidays.

The constitution also stipulates that no one shall be required to receive religious instruction or attend services without his or her consent while serving in the armed forces or while being detained in prison. The Defense Force retains a Christian chaplain but does not restrict the practice of other religions.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Monday, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The country maintained a single central prison owned by the government and managed by the Kolbe Foundation, a Catholic nongovernmental organization. Two Catholic missionaries actively taught juveniles at the prison, and a full-time chaplain was responsible for coordinating religious instruction. Religious conversion was not mandatory, but religion itself functioned as a basis of the prisoner rehabilitation program. Pastors occasionally visited to hold services. Prisoners also were permitted to receive visits from representatives of their religious groups upon written request.

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.

Representatives of faith-based organizations engaged with law enforcement officials to combat violence through social justice programs. The Catholic-based Faith and Justice Commission promoted social justice issues. The Council for Churches, representing 75 percent of the Christian community, participated in the National Committee for Families and Children and the National AIDS Commission. The work of both institutions involved collaboration between governmental and nongovernmental organizations, coordinating and overseeing the

national response to issues concerning children and people living with or affected by HIV or AIDS.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives, including the ambassador, spoke regularly with the government and religious groups about religious diversity and other issues affecting religious freedom.