

SURINAME

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.

The U.S. embassy continued to promote understanding between religious groups through consistent outreach efforts to the Muslim, Hindu, and Christian communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2004 census, approximately 41 percent of the population is Christian, and approximately half are Roman Catholics. The rest are Protestants and other groups, including Moravian, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, evangelical, Baptist, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). In addition, 20 percent of the population is Hindu, including the Sanathan Dharma and the Arya Dewaker; 13.5 percent is Muslim, including Sunni, Ahmadiyya, and the World Islamic Call Society; and approximately 3 percent follow indigenous religions. Baha'is, Jews, Buddhists, Brahma Kumaris, and Hare Krishnas are also present. There are three Rastafarian organizations: Aya Bingi Order, 12th Tribe, and Bobo Shanti.

Indigenous religions are practiced by some Amerindian and Maroon populations. Some Amerindians, concentrated principally in the interior and to a lesser extent in coastal areas, practice shamanism through a medicine man (piaiman). Many Maroons, who inhabit the interior, worship nature through a practice that has no special name. Other Maroons, as well as some Creoles in urban areas, worship their ancestors through a rite called wintie. Citizens of Amerindian and Maroon origin who identify themselves as Christian often also follow indigenous religious customs, with the tacit approval of their Christian church leaders.

There is a correlation between ethnicity and religious faith. Many political parties have strong ethnic ties, and members tend to belong to the same religious group. With the exception of those following indigenous practices, religious communities are not concentrated in any particular region.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The constitution permits individuals to choose or change their religions. The constitution categorizes the right to religious freedom as a “personal right and freedom” and states that any violation of these personal freedoms can be brought before a court of justice. The constitution provides that no individual shall be discriminated against on the grounds of religion. The government does not favor a particular religion, and no tenets of a particular religion are codified in criminal or civil laws.

The government does not establish requirements for recognition of religious groups, nor are religious groups required to register.

Religious instruction in public schools is permitted but not required. Schools offer religious instruction in a variety of faiths. Parents are not permitted to home school their children for religious or other reasons; however, they may enroll their children in private schools, many of which have a religious affiliation. Students in public schools are allowed to practice all elements of their religion, including wearing religious symbols.

The government provides limited subsidies to a number of public elementary and secondary schools established and managed by various religious organizations. While the teachers are civil servants and the schools are public, religious groups provide all funding, with the exception of teachers’ salaries and a small maintenance stipend for the schools. All ethnicities are accepted and enrolled at government-subsidized private schools run by religious organizations.

The armed forces maintain a chaplaincy with Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic clergy available to military personnel of all religious groups. While the chaplaincy provides interfaith services, personnel are also welcome to attend outside religious services.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Holi Phagwa, Diwali, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

There was a report of a dispute between Maroon villagers over religious burial. Indigenous village leaders in a majority-Winti village refused to allow the family of a converted Moravian to be buried on their land. The family appealed to the courts, and the court ruled the deceased had the right to be buried in his home village. The leaders again refused and requested President Bouterse's intervention, and the president met with the groups to discuss their problem without coming to a resolution. The case remains pending on appeal in a higher court.

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.

The Inter-Religious Council consists of representatives from five religious groups: two Hindu groups, two Muslim groups, and the Catholic Church. Council members meet monthly to discuss planned interfaith activities and their positions on government policies. The council is partially supported by, and consults with, the government. Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and Rastafarians also each have umbrella organizations that bring together congregations of the same faith.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy continued to promote understanding between religious groups through consistent outreach efforts to the Muslim, Hindu, and Christian communities. These efforts included periodic outreach events to each community, participation in local religious services and holiday celebrations, and U.S. government-sponsored exchange programs.