

THE INSTITUTE on Religion and Public Policy:

Report on Religious Freedom in the Republic of Panama

Executive Summary

(1) Although Panama is a nation of mostly Catholics, the Government does a good job at upholding its Constitution that provides for freedom of religion to all citizens regardless of their faith. There were no instances of religious discrimination during the reporting period.

THE INSTITUTE on Religion and Public Policy

(2) Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, THE INSTITUTE on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. THE INSTITUTE works globally to promote fundamental rights, and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. THE INSTITUTE encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

Religious Demographics of Panama

(3) The Government of the Republic of Panama does not collect data on the religious affiliations of its 3.3 million citizens, however, other sources estimate that 75 percent to 85 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, and 15 percent to 25 percent of the population is Evangelical Christian. Other religious groups in Panama include Episcopalians, Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Rastafarians, and Baha'is. In fact, Panama is home to one of the world's seven Baha'i Houses of Worship. There are also a few indigenous religions that are still present in Panama today.

Legal Status

(4) The Republic of Panama is a constitutional democracy. The Constitution was ratified on October 11, 1972, and has been revised four times since then, most recently in 2004. Under the Constitution, the Panamanian Government is made up of three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. The President and Vice President are elected on the same ticket for five year terms; however, they are not eligible for reelection until they have sat out for two full terms. The unicameral National Assembly is made up of 71 seats that are filled by popular vote every five years.

(5) The Constitution provides for freedom of religion so long as "Christian morality and public order" are respected. In addition, the Constitution states that religious leaders may only hold political offices related to social assistance, education, and scientific research.

(6) There is no official state religion in Panama, but the Constitution recognizes that Catholicism is the “religion of the majority.” To that affect, many Catholic organizations receive state-sanctioned incentives that other religious organizations do not. For example, under the Constitution, Catholicism is taught in public schools; however, parents are allowed to take their children out of these classes if their beliefs differ from the Catholic majority.

(7) The Constitution does, however, give benefits to all religious organizations through “juridical personality.” This allows all religious groups to apply for tax and other benefits that are available for all nonprofit organizations. In addition, the new immigration law provides that most foreign religious workers are granted six-year visas (renewed every two years) that allow immigrants to stay and work in Panama.

Specific Instances of Religious Discrimination

(8) There were no reports of religious discrimination in Panama, and the Government generally respected the religious rites of all citizens.

(9) In fact, the U.S. State Department reported positively on the Panamanian interfaith cooperation efforts: “Christian groups, including the Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Salvation Army, and Eastern Orthodox churches, participated in a successful ecumenical movement directed by the non-governmental Panamanian Ecumenical Committee. Committee members also participated in an interreligious committee that included Jewish Reform, Islamic, Buddhist, Baha'i, Hindu, and Ibeorgun religious groups. The committee sponsored conferences to discuss matters of religious belief and practice and participated in cultural and religious exchanges. The committee was a member of the Panamanian Civil Society Assembly, an umbrella group of civic organizations that conducts informal governmental oversight.”

US Foreign Policy

(10) The U.S. State Department “discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy officials also met with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom.”

Conclusion

(11) Panama is a constitutional democracy that provides for freedom of religion to all citizens. Although Catholicism is the majority religion, and therefore receives more benefits than other religious organizations, the Government still does a good job of providing equal opportunities for all religions. In addition, there were no reports of religious discrimination this year.