

PANAMA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution, laws, and executive decrees provide for freedom of religion and worship and prohibit discrimination based on religion. The constitution recognizes Catholicism as the religion of the majority of citizens and requires Roman Catholic instruction in public schools, with exemptions allowed.

Following nationwide protests in June and July over poverty, inequality, and corruption, the government invited the Catholic Church to mediate the first round of negotiations between the government and protestors. Archbishop José Domingo Ulloa Mendieta mediated the first round of negotiations from July to September. Representatives from the Interreligious Institute of Panama said that although authorities generally respected the institute, officials did not always solicit its opinions on decisions that impacted general issues of religious freedom and practice. At public events, the government continued to invite primarily Catholic clergy to offer religious invocations.

On November 3, to celebrate independence from Colombia, and again on November 28 to celebrate independence from Spain, leaders of the Interreligious Institute of Panama prayed together during a Catholic Mass at the National Cathedral.

Throughout the year, the U.S. embassy engaged government officials on issues of religious freedom. The Chargé d’Affaires hosted an interfaith roundtable in September.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.3 million (midyear 2022). In a social survey administered by the National Institute of Statistics and Census during the year, 65 percent of respondents identified as Catholic; 22 percent as Evangelical; 4 percent as “other religion”; and 6 percent said they identified with no religion. A leader of an Evangelical church said the survey undercounted evangelicals but officials from the institute stated the survey is likely an accurate estimate of the country’s religious demographics. Jewish leaders estimate their

community at 15,000 members, centered largely in Panama City. According to a Shia Muslim leader, the Muslim community, including Shia and Sunni, numbers approximately 14,000 and is centered primarily in Panama City, Colon, and Penonome, with smaller concentrations in David and Santiago in the western part of the country. Shia Muslims are primarily of Lebanese origin, and Sunni Muslims are primarily of other Arab and Pakistani origin. Episcopalian clergy state their community has 11,000 members. The Baha'i community reports between 4,000 and 6,000 members; the Buddhist community 3,000 members; the Methodist Church 1,500 members; and the Lutheran Church 1,000 members. The Rastafarian community is estimated at 1,000 members. Most Rastafarians live in Colon City, Panama City, and La Chorrera, but there are members in David, Chiriqui, and Bocas Island, Bocas del Toro. The Church of Scientology estimates it has between 100 and 120 members in the country.

Other religious groups, found primarily in Panama City and other large urban areas, include Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, and Pentecostals. Baptists and Methodists derive their membership in large part from the African Antillean and expatriate communities. There are also a small number of Babalaos, represented by two separate organizations. Babalaos are associated with Cuba's Santeria religion, which is based on Yoruba religious tradition.

Indigenous religions, including Ibeorgun (prevalent among Guna Panamanians), Mama Tata and Mama Chi (prevalent among Ngäbe-Buglé Panamanians), and Emberá (prevalent among the Emberá Panamanians) are found in their respective Indigenous communities located throughout the country. Estimating the size of Indigenous religious populations remains difficult, but according to Indigenous representatives, Mama Tata and Mama Chi practitioners number in the tens of thousands, and Inbeorgun and Emberá practitioners likely number in the thousands.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution, laws, and executive decrees prohibit discrimination based on religious practices and provide for freedom of religion and worship, provided that

“Christian morality and public order” are respected. The constitution recognizes Catholicism as the religion of the majority of citizens but does not designate it as the state religion. It limits the public offices that clergy and members of religious orders may hold to those related to social assistance, education, and scientific research. It forbids the formation of political parties based on religion.

The constitution grants legal status to religious groups, permitting them to manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law. If groups decline to register, they may not apply for grants or subsidies. To register, a group must submit to the Ministry of Government a power of attorney, charter, names of its board members (if applicable), a copy of the internal bylaws (if applicable), and a four-balboa (\$4) processing fee. Once the Ministry of Government approves the registration, the religious association must record the ministry’s resolution in the Public Registry. Registered religious associations must apply to the Directorate of Internal Revenue of the Ministry of Economy and Finance to receive clearance for duty-free imports. The government may allot publicly owned properties to registered religious associations upon approval by the Legislative Tax Committee and the cabinet. The law states that income from religious activities is tax-exempt as long as it is collected through such activities as church and burial services, and charitable events.

Registered religious groups are: the Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox Church, Episcopal Church, Methodist Church, Evangelical Methodist Church, the Baha’i Faith, Soka Gakkai International (Buddhist), Church of Jesus Christ, Muslim Congregation of Colon, Muslim Congregation of Panama City, Muslim Congregation of Coclé Province, Muslim Congregation of Chiriqui Province, Jewish Kol Shearith Israel Congregation, Jewish Shevet Ahim Congregation, Jewish Beth El Congregation, Baptist Church, Hossana Evangelical Church, Casa de Oracion (house of prayer) Cristiana Evangelical Church, Pentecostal Church, Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church, Crossroads Christian Church, Ministry of the Family Christian Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Church of Scientology, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Rastafarian congregation and the Babalaos chose not to register.

By law, Indigenous tribes control their own autonomous lands within the country, which are called *comarcas* (literally “counties,” but similar to U.S. Native

American tribal nations). According to the law, tribal autonomy allows the practice of religion and cultural traditions without interference from the state.

The ombudsman mediates disputes, but the office's formal recommendations are not binding. The ombudsman may act only if the office receives a formal complaint, or if a complaint is made public through media.

The constitution requires public schools to provide instruction on Roman Catholic teachings. Parents may exempt their children from religious education. The constitution also allows the establishment of private religious schools. Private religious schools may not refuse to enroll a student who is not a member of the religious group sponsoring the school.

Immigration law grants foreign religious workers temporary missionary worker visas that they must renew every two years, for up to a total of six years. Catholic and Orthodox Christian priests and nuns are exempt from the two-year renewal requirement and receive six-year visas, with no limitation other than "respect for Christian morality." Clergy of other religious groups, as well as other religious workers, are also eligible for the special six-year visa but must submit additional documentation with their applications. These additional requirements include a copy of the organization's bylaws, a Ministry of Government-issued registration certificate, and a letter from the organization's leader in the country certifying the religious worker will be employed at its place of worship. The application fee is 250 balboas (\$250) for all religious denominations.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Following nationwide protests in June and July over poverty, inequality, and corruption, the government invited the Catholic Church to mediate the first round of negotiations between the government and protestors. The Catholic Church named Archbishop José Domingo Ulloa Mendieta as the lead mediator for the first round of negotiations, which began in July and concluded in September.

Members of non-Catholic religious groups continued to state the constitution was ambiguous, in that it forbade religious discrimination, yet designated Roman Catholicism as the sole religion taught in public schools.

In April, news outlets accused the Ministry of Security of distributing “propaganda” from the Church of Scientology. The ministry had accepted and then solicited values-based booklets from a nonprofit organization affiliated with the church with the plan to distribute them as part of a violence-prevention program. Following the news controversy, the Ministry of Security cancelled the program and stopped distribution of the booklets that the church had donated. A leader of the Church of Scientology stated that Ministry of Security officials never provided a direct explanation for the program’s closure and have since ignored inquiries from the church.

Representatives of the Interreligious Institute of Panama stated that government officials did not often solicit its opinions on decisions that impacted general issues of religious freedom and practice, although government officials did seek institute members’ ceremonial participation in public events. According to the representatives, the institute continued to seek a government-level secretariat for religious affairs similar to the existing secretariats for Afro-descendants and persons with disabilities. Nonetheless, institute representatives did not engage directly on these topics with government officials.

At public events, the government continued to invite primarily Catholic clergy to offer religious invocations.

In September, President Laurentino Cortizo celebrated Rosh Hashanah with leaders from the Jewish community.

In May, the Baha’i community celebrated the 50th anniversary of the construction of the Baha’i temple in the country. Hector Carrasquilla, the mayor of San Miguelito, where the temple is located, said the temple “plays a very important role in healing lives and fostering love among neighbors.” He encouraged the Baha’i community “to continue in their efforts to promote greater unity in our society.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Interreligious Institute of Panama, an interfaith committee made up of representatives of Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, and other Protestant churches, Salvation Army, Colon Islamic Congregation, the Baha'i Faith, Kol Shearith Jewish Congregation, and the Buddhist Soka Gakkai Congregation, continued to meet several times during the year. The institute's objectives included providing a coordination mechanism for interfaith activities and promoting mutual respect and appreciation among the various religious groups. In April, the institute co-hosted a youth event with the Buddhist Soka Gakkai Congregation focused on climate change. In June, Rabbi Gustavo Kraselnik, the institute's president, and Bishop Julio Murray, the president of the Ecumenical Committee, an association of Christian churches, attended the Second Interreligious Forum of the Americas in Los Angeles. Both spoke on panels about how religious organizations can work to build a sustainable and equitable future in the region. In October, the institute celebrated International Religious Freedom Day. In November, the institute hosted a workshop on the rights of children and adolescents in conjunction with the Ecumenical Committee and the Bishops' Conference, the Catholic bishops' association. Throughout the year, institute members jointly celebrated key holidays, including Christmas, Rosh Hashanah and Passover, and Ramadan.

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In March, the Plaza Mayor Museum in Panama Viejo, Panama City, opened a permanent exhibit on historical Jewish communities in the country in the 17th century, including the story of the first Jews who tried to establish a synagogue in 1640 in Panama Viejo.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Throughout the year, embassy officials engaged the government on issues of religious freedom. In October, the Chargé d'Affaires spoke with immigration authorities to discuss the process for issuing missionary visas in an equitable and transparent manner. In March, the Chargé hosted a lunch with the American Jewish Committee. In April, he hosted an iftar with leaders of the Muslim

community. At both events, participants discussed respect for religious tolerance and diversity. The Chargé emphasized the same themes, noting that Panama serves as a regional example for other countries to emulate. Embassy officials also engaged with individual leaders of minority religious groups during the year, including those of the Baha'i, Muslim, and Jewish communities.

In September, the Chargé hosted an interfaith roundtable in which leaders from different religious groups shared their views about religious issues and their status in the country in general. Episcopal, Methodist, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Colon Islamic Iman, Balboa Union Church, Baha'i, Buddhist, and Church of Jesus Christ leaders attended the event. During the roundtable, attendees said that they had not been successful in meeting with National Migration Service authorities to discuss matters of shared interest. In an October meeting with the Director of the National Migration Service, the Chargé recommended that the director meet directly with Interreligious Institute representatives. She did so four weeks later.

In November, the Ambassador met with the Holy See's Apostolic Nuncio. The two discussed the United States' and the Catholic Church's shared commitment to religious freedom and tolerance.

The embassy used social media channels periodically to commemorate major holidays of various religions and to recognize International Religious Freedom Day in October.