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Guyana

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship, including the right to choose and change one's religion. According to the constitution, the government-appointed Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC) promotes ethnic and religious harmony; the commission includes representatives of the country's main religious traditions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Rastafarianism.

The Rastafari Council continued to state that a law criminalizing the possession of 15 grams (.53 ounces) or more of marijuana infringed on Rastafarian religious practices. According to a council member, a bill passed in 2022 prescribing restorative justice remedies, such as counseling and community service, instead of prison sentences for possession of fewer than 30 grams (1.06 ounces) of cannabis also discriminated against Rastafarians because the law hindered their constitutional right to freely practice their religion. In March, the government reconstituted the ERC, appointing 10 new commissioners. In September, the ERC assessed reports that a fast-food restaurant had sold fried chicken in paper bags labelled with the Hindu religious 'OM' symbol. According to the ERC, the restaurant's actions amounted to "religious intolerance." The restaurant owners subsequently issued a written apology to the Hindu community and stopped using these paper bags. During the year, the government promoted respect for religious diversity, including through public messaging on religious holidays.

Religious leaders continued to say there was a high degree of respect for religious diversity and interreligious cooperation in the country. During the year, the Inter-Religious Organization of Guyana (IROG), whose members include representatives of the Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Rastafarian, and Baha'i faiths, held interfaith programs and published messages in support of religious tolerance. IROG's constituent religious groups continued to lead and participate in programs promoting interfaith tolerance and religious freedom. IROG programs included February's observance of World Interfaith Harmony Week, during which it hosted a panel discussion on religion and the promotion of harmony in the country at the University of Guyana.

In April, the U.S. Ambassador attended IROG-hosted Interfaith Harmony Week activities. At these events, the Ambassador encouraged government officials and religious representatives to continue to promote and pursue religious inclusivity. In May, the Ambassador met with ERC members and encouraged them to work with government officials to continue their efforts to promote respect for religious diversity and inclusivity, and cohesion. U.S. embassy officials met with representatives of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups throughout the year and discussed issues related to religious tolerance. Embassy officials amplified messages of religious tolerance on social media with greetings posted on Christian, Islamic, and Hindu holidays.

Section I.

Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 792,000 (midyear 2023). According to the most recent national census conducted in 2012, 64 percent of the population identify as Christian, 25 percent Hindu, and 7 percent Muslim (mainly Sunni, and a small Ahmadiyya Muslim community). Less than 1 percent belong to other religious groups, which include Rastafarians, Baha'is, Afro-descendent Faithists, and Areruya, an Indigenous faith system. An estimated 3 percent of the population do not profess a religious affiliation. Among Christians, Pentecostals comprise 23 percent of the population; Roman Catholics, 7 percent; Anglicans, 5 percent; Seventh-day Adventists, 5 percent; Methodists, 1 percent; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, less than 1 percent, and other Christians, 21 percent, which includes those belonging to the Assembly of God Church, the Church of Christ, and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, among others.

The membership of most religious groups includes a cross section of ethnic groups, although nearly all Hindus are of Indo-Guyanese descent, and most Rastafarians are of Afro-Guyanese descent. Most Muslims are of Indo-Guyanese descent, but there is also a significant Afro-Muslim population.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship, including the right to choose and change one's religion. The constitution protects the right of religious groups to provide religious instructions to their adherents. No citizen is compelled to take part in any religious education, ceremony, or observance without the individual's consent. The constitution forbids taking an oath contrary to one's religion or belief without the individual's consent. An unenforced law prescribes a prison term of one year for a blasphemous libel conviction; however, the law exempts religious expression made in "good faith and decent language."

The constitution mandates the establishment of the ERC, with the purpose of promoting ethnic harmony, eliminating ethnic discrimination, and encouraging respect for religious diversity. The ERC includes representatives of the country's main religious traditions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Rastafarianism.

There is no official system for formal registration of a religious group, but to receive government recognition, all places of worship must be registered through the Deeds Registry. The Deeds Registry requires an organization to submit a proposed name and address for the place of worship, as well as the names of executive group members or congregation leaders. Once formally recognized, a place of worship falls under legislation governing nonprofit organizations, allowing the organization to conduct financial operations, buy property, and receive tax benefits in its name.

Foreign religious workers require a visa from the Ministry of Home Affairs. Religious groups seeking to enter an Indigenous village for the purpose of proselytizing must apply for and obtain permission from the village council. Application to a village council must include the name of the group, the names of its members who will be going to the village, their purpose, and the estimated date of arrival. Reportedly, however, village councils rarely enforce this requirement.

There is no religious education in public schools, regardless of whether the school is religiously affiliated. Most public schools are unaffiliated with a religious group but the majority that are affiliated are Anglican or Methodist. There are also private religiously affiliated schools. Private schools are operated entirely by private groups and are not funded by the state. All students attending private religious schools must participate in religious education, regardless of a student's religious beliefs.

Children must show proof of vaccination to attend public or private schools. There are no exemptions for religious reasons.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

The Rastafari Council continued to state that a law criminalizing the possession of 15 grams (.53 ounces) or more of marijuana infringed on Rastafarian religious practices. The law continued to criminalize the possession of marijuana after a 2022 amendment replaced the prison sentence for possession of 30 grams (1.06 ounces) or less of marijuana with counselling or community service. The Rastafari Council stated this change in law still restricted the use of marijuana as part of the group's religious expression. In September, the Rastafari Council petitioned the ERC to press the government to decriminalize the possession of 30 grams (1.06 ounces) or less of marijuana. As of year's end, the ERC had not responded to the council's request.

The government continued to maintain regulations limiting the number of visas for foreign representatives of religious groups based on historical trends, the relative size of the group, and the president's discretion; however, the government and religious groups, whose membership included foreign missionaries, continued to state the government did not apply the visa limitation rule. Religious groups also said the visa quotas the government allotted to them were sufficient and did not adversely affect their activities.

In March, the government reconstituted the ERC, appointing 10 new commissioners to serve for three years. During the swearing in of the new commissioners, President Mohammed Irfaan Ali stated, "Diversity is an asset we must value and cherish. Greater inclusion and equality are goals to which we must continuously aspire."

In September, the ERC assessed reports that a fast-food restaurant had sold fried chicken in paper bags labelled with the Hindu religious 'OM' symbol, the most sacred symbol in

Hinduism according to its followers. According to the ERC, the fast-food restaurant's actions amounted to "religious intolerance." The restaurant owners subsequently issued a written apology to the Hindu community and stopped using the paper bags.

The government continued to promote interfaith harmony and respect for diversity through its public messaging and initiatives that fostered social cohesion. On all major Christian, Hindu, and Islamic holidays, President Ali delivered national messages.

Government representatives continued to meet with leaders of various religious groups with the expressed aim of promoting social cohesion and discussing the government's strong support for diversity, including of Muslim, Hindu, and Christian groups. Government officials also participated regularly in the observance of Christian, Hindu, and Islamic religious holidays throughout the year. The government continued to declare some holy days of the country's three major religious groups, including Eid al-Adha, Holi, Easter, and Diwali, as national holidays.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to religious leaders, there was a high degree of acceptance of and respect for religious diversity. The IROG, whose membership comprises approximately 40 religious bodies and organizations and includes representatives from the Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Rastafarian, and Baha'i faiths, continued its stated purpose of promoting social cohesion and respecting religious diversity through its programs and initiatives. During the year, IROG published messages in support of religious tolerance. Programs included observing the annual February World Interfaith Harmony Week with prayers and reflections under the theme "Love of God and Love of Thy Neighbor." During the week, IROG hosted its annual interfaith breakfast to launch Interfaith Harmony Week and a panel discussion at the University of Guyana on religion and promoting harmony in the country.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In April, the Ambassador attended Interfaith Harmony Week activities hosted by IROG. At these events, the Ambassador encouraged participating government officials and religious

representatives to continue to promote and pursue religious inclusivity. In May, the Ambassador met with ERC commissioners and took the opportunity to encourage government officials to continue their efforts to promote respect for religious diversity and cohesion.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials attended events hosted by the Christian, Muslim, and Hindu communities, demonstrating U.S. support for religious diversity. During the year, the embassy amplified messages of respect for religious inclusivity and tolerance with regular social media postings encouraging religious freedom. In October, in honor of International Religious Freedom Day, the embassy posted on social media, "We join the international community to celebrate International Religious Freedom Day. Today, and every day, let us recommit to advance the rights of people everywhere to exercise their freedom of religion or belief."

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