

BELIZE 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, freedom to change religion or belief, and freedom to express one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. Non-denominational "spirituality" classes including morals and values and world religions are taught in public schools. While there is no official rule governing students' ability to opt out of these sessions, parents may decide their children will not attend classes. A Christian nongovernmental organization (NGO) manages the only prison in the country and religion is the basis of the rehabilitation program.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy representatives interacted with a wide spectrum of religious groups to promote and reinforce the importance of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 350,000 (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2010 census (the most recent available), the Roman Catholic Church is the largest religious group, accounting for 40 percent of the population. Pentecostals constitute 8.5 percent, Seventh-day Adventists 5.5 percent, Anglicans 4.7 percent, Mennonites 3.8 percent, Baptists 3.6 percent, Methodists 2.9 percent, the Church of the Nazarene 2.8 percent, and Jehovah's Witnesses 1.7 percent. Groups that together constitute 10.9 percent of the population include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Rastafarians, the Salvation Army, and Bahais. The census lists 15.6 percent of the population as not belonging to any religious group.

No religious group is a majority in any of the country's six districts. Catholics live 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 Framework

BELIZE

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, freedom to change religion or belief, and freedom – either alone or in community with others – to manifest and propagate one’s religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. It provides that no one can be compelled to take an oath contrary to one’s religion or belief. The constitution stipulates that religious groups may establish places of education and states that “no such community shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for persons of that community.”

The preamble to the constitution acknowledges “the supremacy of God.” The governor general appoints one of the 12 members of the senate following the advice of the Council of Churches and the Evangelical Association of Churches, which together include the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches, and the Salvation Army, the Chinese Christian Mission, the Chinese Christian Church, and the Seventh-day Adventists.

An unenforced law limits speech that is “blasphemous or indecent.”

Discrimination on religious grounds is illegal.

Religious groups must register with the official Companies Registry and pay a fee. The registration process is similar to that of a business, and registration permits the religious organization to operate legally in the country, be recognized by the state, negotiate, sue and be sued, own property, hire employees, and lend or borrow money. There is a onetime registration fee of 295 Belize dollars (\$148) and a yearly fee of five Belize dollars (\$2.50). Requirements for registration are a memorandum of association with the government which sets out its objective and mission, an article of association, and a letter from the central bank if the organization has foreign subscribers. Failure to register results in the shutdown of the facility, but no additional sanctions.

The government does not levy property taxes on churches and other places of worship, but other church-owned buildings occupied on a regular basis, such as clergy residences, are not exempt. Religious organizations may also partner with the state to operate schools, run hospitals and other charity organizations, and in some cases receive financial assistance from the government.

Foreign religious workers may enter the country and proselytize, but they must apply for a religious worker’s visa and purchase a religious worker’s permit.

BELIZE

The public school curriculum includes nondenominational “spirituality” classes including morals and values and world religions. While there is no official rule governing students’ ability to opt out of these sessions, parents may decide their children will not attend classes. Students in both public and church-run schools from kindergarten through sixth grade receive these weekly religious education classes.

The constitution prohibits any educational institution from obligating a child to attend any religious ceremonies or observances. Students can abstain from attending school-sponsored religious observances if their parents object. While there is no specific law permitting abstention from weekly spirituality/religious classes, schools make exceptions for families who object. Most elementary schools, high schools, and some colleges are church-managed. Catholic and other Christian holidays are routinely observed.

The defense force retains a Christian chaplain but does not restrict the practice of other religions. Clergy from different religious groups may apply to serve inmates at the Belize Central Prison, and this is allowed on a regular basis.

Government Practices

The government continued to own a single prison which is managed by a Christian NGO, the Kolbe Foundation. The foundation coordinated religious instruction for inmates. Religion formed the basis of the prisoner rehabilitation program. Religious leaders from varying denominations visited the prison to hold services at a nondenominational chapel within the prison. The prison respected dietary restrictions for prisoners from various religious backgrounds.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives interacted with a wide spectrum of religious groups to promote and reinforce the importance of religious freedom.