

# **BELIZE 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom to express one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. Nondenominational "spirituality" classes, including morals, values, and world religions, are taught in public schools. While there is no official rule governing a student's ability to opt out of these sessions, parents may decide whether their children will attend these classes. In January a court ruled in favor of a Rastafarian schoolboy, whom a school had not allowed to attend class because of his dreadlocks. Following the ruling, the school allowed the boy to attend class and agreed to pay the family's legal fees. A Catholic nongovernmental organization (NGO), which uses religion as the basis of prisoner rehabilitation, continued to manage the only prison in the country by providing administration, policing, and security.

Some civil society leaders said certain evangelical pastors acted irresponsibly in their radio and television broadcasts on religious-affiliated stations, including by attacking other religious leaders who supported an August 2016 Supreme Court ruling that found unconstitutional some parts of the criminal code outlawing "carnal intercourse against the order of nature." The rift continued between the National Evangelical Association of Belize (NEAB) and the Belizean Association of Evangelical Churches (BAEC). The NEAB stated it believed the government had interfered to ensure the Council of Churches' senate representative was sympathetic to the political party in power. The BAEC is a member of the Council of Churches while the NEAB is not.

Embassy representatives met with government officials to emphasize the importance of the government's continued engagement with a wide spectrum of religious groups in the country, including religious minorities. The embassy invited the religious community to participate in embassy programming and outreach and to reinforce the role of religious groups in promoting respect for religious diversity and tolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 360,000 (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2010 census, the Roman Catholic Church is the largest religious

group, accounting for 40 percent of the population. Protestants make up 34 percent, including Pentecostals (9 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (6 percent), Anglicans (5 percent), Mennonites (4 percent), Baptists (4 percent), Methodists (3 percent), and the Church of the Nazarene (3 percent). Jehovah's Witnesses make up 2 percent of the population, while other religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Rastafarians, The Salvation Army, and Bahais, together constitute 11 percent. Approximately 15 percent of the population does not belong to any listed religious affiliation.

No religious group is a majority in any of the country's six districts. Catholics reside throughout the country. Mennonites and Pentecostals reside mostly in the rural areas of the Cayo and Orange Walk Districts.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

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 states that no one may 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.” Discrimination on religious grounds is illegal.

The preamble to the constitution acknowledges “the supremacy of God.” The Council of Churches, a board including representatives from several major Christian denominations, along with the BAEC, together appoint one senator to the senate with the governor general's concurrence. The two groups together include the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches, The Salvation Army, the Chinese Christian Mission, the Church of Christ, Assembly of God Church, the Seventh-day Adventists, and other evangelical Protestant groups. They do not, however, include the NEAB, which split from the BAEC in 2015 over political differences, or any non-Christian denominations. The current “Church” senator was appointed in November 2015. Senate transitions typically occur with a change in administration.

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

The law requires all religious groups to register with the official Companies Registry within the Ministry of the Attorney General in a process similar to that of a business. 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 one-time registration fee of 295 Belize dollars (\$148) and a yearly fee of five Belize dollars (\$2.50). Requirements for registration include a memorandum of association with the government delineating the group's objective and mission, an article of association, and a letter from the central bank if the organization has foreign financial contributors. The government may shut down the facilities of groups that fail to register.

The government does not levy property taxes on churches and other places of worship. Other church-owned buildings occupied on a regular basis, such as clergy residences, are not tax-exempt. Religious organizations may also partner with the state to operate schools, run hospitals and other charity organizations, and, depending on funding availability, receive financial assistance from the government. Local religious groups commonly affiliate with international NGOs and international religious partners from the United States and Canada to carry out mission work in the country. They hold joint conferences and outreach activities to address health, poverty, and education issues. Government assistance is rare, but the government occasionally works with religious groups in specific fields, such as health services and education.

The public school curriculum includes weekly nondenominational "spirituality" classes incorporating morals, values, and world religions for students in both public and church-run schools from kindergarten through sixth grade. While there is no official rule governing students' ability to opt out of these sessions, parents may decide their children will not attend. The constitution prohibits any educational institution from obligating a child to attend any religious ceremonies or observances. Christian churches manage most public elementary schools, high schools, and some colleges. Catholic and other Christian holidays are routinely observed at the schools' discretion. A few schools are run by non-Christian religious groups, such as the Muslim Community Primary School in Belize City.

The law grants respect for inmates' religious beliefs, and as such, inmates may participate in religious activities within prison facilities. Religious leaders may request use of the chaplain inside the facility and offer religious service to inmates. Prison authorities avoid unnecessary work by prisoners on Sunday and other major Christian religious holidays (Christmas and Good Friday) and by prisoners

recorded as belonging to other religions on their recognized day of religious observance. The law allows religious scriptures and other books of religious observance be made available to the prisoners.

To enter the country and proselytize, foreign religious workers need a multi-entry visa, which costs 100 Belize dollars (\$50) and is valid for one year. Applicants must also purchase a religious worker's permit, costing 50 Belize dollars (\$25). The visas are renewable on an annual basis. Visa requirements include information on length of stay, location, funding for activity, and specific purpose. Members of all religious groups are eligible to obtain visas. While the group does not need to be locally registered, recommendation by a locally registered religious group lends more credibility to the visa request according to local authorities.

The Belize Defense Force retains a nondenominational chaplain and space for religious observance. With the prior consent of the authorities, any religious group may use the space for worship.

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

### **Government Practices**

In January a court ruled in favor of a Rastafarian schoolboy who was not allowed to attend class at a public school in August 2016 because of his dreadlocks. Following the ruling, the school allowed the boy to attend class and agreed to pay the family's legal fees.

The government owned the Belize Central Prison, the only prison in the country. Catholic NGO, the Kolbe Foundation, continued to run the prison by providing general administration, policing, and security. Religious leaders from varying denominations visited the prison to hold services at a nondenominational chapel within the prison. Kolbe reported the prison continued to respect dietary restrictions for prisoners from various religious backgrounds. Several religious groups, including Anglicans, Methodists, Catholics, evangelical Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, Nazarenes, Mennonites, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Baptists, and Mormons, continued to make frequent use of the access to clergy granted by prison administration.

The government continued to allow religious organizations to own and operate radio and television stations. There were 15 registered religious-based radio stations operating in the country; the government did not provide specific

information on which religious groups owned or operated radio and television stations. Some sources estimated the majority of the stations were owned and run by evangelical Protestant groups. The other stations included one Catholic, two Mennonite, and one Pentecostal radio station.

In September the Council of Churches said it was displeased with the government's decision to hold National Day (September 10) festivities with a citizens' parade on a Sunday. The government held the planned activities on that day but stated "relevant steps would be taken" to avoid a similar situation in the future.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Some church leaders said certain evangelical pastors acted irresponsibly in their radio and television broadcasts on religion-associated stations, including attacking religious leaders supporting the August 2016 Supreme Court ruling that found the section of the criminal code that outlawed "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" to be unconstitutional.

The rift continued between the NEAB and the BAEC. The NEAB stated it believed the government had interfered to ensure the Council of Churches' senate representative remained sympathetic to the political party in power. The NEAB was not a member of the Council while the BAEC was.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy representatives met with government officials to emphasize the importance of the government's continued engagement with a wide spectrum of religious groups in the country, including religious minorities.

The embassy invited the religious community to participate in embassy programming and outreach and to reinforce the role of religious groups in promoting respect for religious diversity and tolerance.