

# **BELIZE 2020 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. By law, the Belize Council of Churches (BCC), a board including representatives from several major Christian denominations, and the Belize Association of Evangelical Churches (BAEC), alternate in appointing one individual, the "church senator," to the Senate with the Governor General's concurrence. In August, authorities arrested and charged an evangelical Protestant pastor under the COVID-19 state of emergency regulations, which limited gatherings to under 10 persons, after he led a congregation of 16 persons in worship. In September, the government withdrew the introduction of the Equal Opportunities Bill (EOB) after the Belize Council of Churches (BCC) said it could not support it in its "current form." Many religious groups opposed the EOB, stating that the government forced the bill through the approval process without consulting them and that the EOB provided no specific protections on the basis of religion or personal belief. In December, the Governor General appointed Reverend Alvin Moses Benguche, a Methodist Bishop, as the new church senator representing all religious groups, on the BCC's recommendation following the November parliamentary election.

Religious groups continued collaboration with international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to carry out missionary work in the country. The interfaith Belize Chaplain Service (BCS) continued to promote several initiatives, including counseling services for relatives of crime victims and for police officers, with the stated objective to provide professional, multifaith, compassionate pastoral care to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of the public.

U.S. embassy officials, including the *Charge d'Affaires*, reiterated the importance of religious tolerance in meetings with government officials and encouraged the government's engagement with a wide spectrum of religious groups. The embassy invited representatives of religious groups, including Anglican Bishop Philip Wright, Catholic Bishop Lawrence Nicasio, and representatives of religious minorities to participate in embassy programs and outreach to reinforce the role of religious groups in promoting respect for religious diversity and tolerance. Due to COVID-19 restrictions on public engagement and assembly, the embassy used

social media to highlight the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 400,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2010 census, members of the Roman Catholic Church are the largest religious group, accounting for 40 percent of the population. Protestants make up 32 percent, including Pentecostals (8 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (5 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 two percent of the population, while other religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Rastafarians, The Salvation Army, Baha'is, and Soka Gakkai together constitute 11 percent. Approximately 15 percent of the population does not affiliate with one of these listed religious organizations.

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.

The 2010 census lists 577 Muslims in the country; this number does not include the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat group, which according to its leaders, numbers fewer than 160 individuals. Some members of indigenous groups, including the Maya and the Garifuna, also practice traditional folk religious rituals.

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

#### **Legal Framework**

The preamble to the constitution acknowledges "the supremacy of God." 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. It also provides for freedom, either alone or in community with others, to manifest and propagate one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. It states that no one may be compelled to take an oath contrary to one's religion or belief. The constitution also stipulates 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."

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

By law, the BCC, a board including representatives from several major Christian denominations, and the Belize Association of Evangelical Churches (BAEC) alternate in appointing one individual, the “church senator,” to the Senate with the Governor General’s concurrence. The two groups together include the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches; Salvation Army; Chinese Christian Mission; Church of Christ; Assembly of God Church; Seventh-day Adventists; and other evangelical Protestant groups. They do not include the National Evangelical Association of Belize (NEAB), which separated from the BAEC in 2015 due to political differences. Non-Christian religious groups are represented by the church senator; they participate in the church senator’s activities but do not play a role in selecting the senator.

By law, the church senator provides advice on public policy affecting the political positions of religious groups. This senatorial seat places the political interests of religious leaders on par with three other senators, appointed to represent labor unions, the business community, and the NGO community, respectively. The Senate is the upper chamber of the country’s two-part National Assembly; members of the House of Representatives run for election, while senators are appointed.

The law requires all religious groups to register with the official Companies Registry in 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; receive state recognition; 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 (\$150) 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 do not 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, hospitals, and other charity organizations and, depending on funding availability, receive financial assistance from the government.

The public school curriculum includes weekly nondenominational “spirituality” classes incorporating morals and values. Government supported church-run schools may teach lessons on world religions for students from kindergarten through eighth grade as part of their social studies curriculum. These church-run schools also offer separate religious education classes that are specific to their own faith. While there is no official rule governing a student’s ability to opt out of either 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.

Due to insufficient government funds and pre-independence agreements, Christian churches manage most public elementary schools, high schools, and some colleges. Approximately 60 percent of primary schools, 40 percent of high schools, and 50 percent of colleges are comanaged by churches with the government. Churches that co-manage educational institutions include Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist, Nazarene, Salvation Army, evangelical Protestant, Presbyterian, Muslim, Pentecostal, and Mennonite. Schools routinely observe Christian and other religious holidays at the schools’ discretion. Non-Christian religious groups run a few schools, such as the Muslim Community Primary School in Belize City. All schools, public and private, must incorporate the national education curriculum and adhere to government regulations; the Ministry of Education monitors their compliance.

The law grants respect for inmates’ religious beliefs, and inmates may participate in religious activities in prison. Religious leaders may request use of the chapel inside the facility and offer religious services to inmates. Prison authorities avoid requiring unnecessary work by prisoners on Sunday and other major Christian holidays (Christmas and Good Friday) and by prisoners recorded as belonging to other religions on their recognized day of religious observance. The law allows the provision of religious scriptures and other books of religious observance to 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 intended length of stay, location, funding for activity, and specific purpose. Members of all religious groups are eligible to obtain visas. While a 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 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 August, authorities arrested and charged an evangelical Protestant pastor under the COVID-19 State of Emergency regulations, which limited gatherings to under 10 persons, after he led a congregation of 16 persons in worship. The pastor was cited and fined by a magistrates' court.

In September, the government withdrew the introduction of the EOB after the BCC said it was unable to support it in its "current form." According to religious groups, the EOB provided no specific protections on the basis of religion or personal belief. The stated purpose of the EOB was to ensure equal access to public services, including health care. The legislation aimed to protect individuals from discrimination, harassment, and victimization. The areas of public life covered under the EOB include employment (full-time, part-time, and casual), provision of goods and services, education, accommodation (including rental and hotel accommodation), sport, club and club membership, transfer of land, and administration of laws and programming.

In a public statement, Catholic Bishop Lawrence Nicasio said the "EOB was rushed" and the Catholic Church could not support it because "it gives unparalleled power to the Commission and Tribunal, it endangers the public's freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, it infringes on parental rights, it suggests that there are more than two genders, and in its present form would do much to confuse the youth of Belize regarding the sacredness of sexuality and that sex is not, first of all, a pleasure source but a way toward holy matrimonial union and conception of children." The NEAB arranged motorcades across the country to express opposition to the EOB, stating, "It establishes a 'social re-engineering Commission & Tribunal' to dictate, enforce, and impose liberal, anti-God standards & values upon the nation of Belize." The NEAB also said the government did not undertake sufficient consultation with religious groups before drafting the EOB. Rights Insight, a local NGO, conducted a study at the beginning of the year that found

54.6 percent of respondents supported the draft EOB. Prime Minister Dean Barrow, in announcing the withdrawal of the EOB, said, “By and large Cabinet felt that this is a good bill, this is a necessary bill, it is an overdue bill, and Cabinet was very upset at having to make the decision not to proceed with it.” He acknowledged that the churches’ opposition was largely responsible for the EOB’s failure.

The government held discussions with the Council of Churches; then-church senator Ashley Rocke, a Baptist pastor; and several other religious leaders to keep them abreast of government plans of interest to them, including the education budget and the EOB. According to the head of the Council of Churches, while by law the church senator represents all religions, there continued to be little response from non-Christian religious groups to the church senator’s efforts to seek their political perspectives. In December, the Governor General appointed Reverend Alvin Moses Benguche, a Methodist Bishop, as the new church senator on the BCC’s recommendation following the November parliamentary election.

The government continued to permit religious leaders from varying denominations to visit the government-owned and -financed central prison to hold services at the prison’s nondenominational chapel. According to the Kolbe Foundation, COVID-19 restrictions, including a three-week lockdown of the facility, prevented religious groups from consistently providing outreach services to prisoners.

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

The interfaith BCS, which includes representatives from the Methodist, Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal Churches, Salvation Army, and Chinese Christian Mission, as well as Muslim and Baha’i leaders, continued to promote counseling services for relatives of crime victims, with the stated objective to provide professional, multifaith, compassionate pastoral care to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of the public. The BCS continued to offer services to the central prison and to Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital staff, patients, and relatives. The BCS continued to run the chapel at the hospital, offering weekly Sunday services and Islamic prayers on Fridays. During the year, the BCS organized blood donation drives for patients in need. The BCS provided mentorship to members of the Belize Coast Guard Sea Cadets, comprising children between the ages of eight and 13 years from southside Belize City. The assistance included tutoring with school assignments, counseling, and Bible studies.

Thirteen registered religious-based radio stations continued to operate in the country. According to the Belize Broadcasting Authority, evangelical Protestant groups continued to own and operate most of the stations. Other stations included one Catholic, two Mennonite, and one Pentecostal radio station.

The Kolbe Foundation, a Catholic organization, continued to manage the country's central prison with a focus on rehabilitating inmates. It provided support for all religious denominations within the inmate population, subject to the availability of a suitable chaplain. According to the BCC, the Kolbe Foundation continued to respect dietary restrictions for prisoners of diverse religious backgrounds.

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

The Charge d'Affaires met with government officials, including then-church senator Rocke, Anglican Bishop Wright, and Catholic Bishop Nicasio, to emphasize the importance of continuing to engage with a wide spectrum of religious groups in the country, including with Christians and non-Christian religious minorities consisting of Buddhists of Chinese and Southwest Asian origins, Hindus of Indian origin, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, the Garifuna Afro-indigenous religions, and Mayan folk religionists.

The embassy invited representatives of religious groups, including Bishop Wright, Bishop Nicasio, and representatives of religious minorities, to participate in embassy programs and outreach to reinforce the role of religious groups in promoting respect for religious diversity and tolerance, including reintegrating former gang members into society, caring for migrants and asylees, and addressing crime.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions on public engagement and assembly, the embassy drew on social media, including Facebook and Twitter, to highlight the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity. Messages included the need to protect and support religious freedom.