

# PANAMA 2020 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 Roman Catholicism as the religion of the majority of citizens and requires Catholic instruction in public schools. According to media sources in September, a group of Babalaos from the Yoruba (Cuban Santeria) religious group submitted a request to the Citizenship Participation Office at the National Assembly to pass a law recognizing them as a religious denomination. Public schools continued to teach Catholicism, but parents could exempt their children from religion classes. Some non-Catholic groups continued to state the government provided preferential distribution of subsidies to small Catholic private schools for salaries.

According to a Rastafarian community leader, young Rastafarians found their private and public sector employment prospects hampered by societal discrimination against the wearing of dreadlocks and traditional Rastafarian attire, and therefore, some decided to leave the religion. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, there were only three public events involving representatives of the Inter-Religious Institute during the year. In January, clergy from various denominations conducted a joint prayer during the nationally televised ceremony commemorating the 20th anniversary of the handover of the Panama Canal. In July, members of the Jewish community organized a virtual interfaith event commemorating the 26th anniversary of the terrorist suicide bombing of an Alas Chiricanas flight in which 20 persons lost their lives, the majority of them members of the country's Jewish community and whose community was reportedly the target of the attack. On November 3, to celebrate national Independence Day, leaders of the Inter-Religious Institute gave remarks and prayed during a nationally televised Catholic Mass held at the National Cathedral, alongside the Papal Nuncio and the Archbishop of Panama.

In October, U.S. embassy officials met virtually with the new ombudsman, Eduardo Leblanc, to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and the equal treatment of all religious groups, including religious minorities. The embassy used social media channels periodically throughout the year to commemorate major holidays of various religions and recognize International Religious Freedom Day in October.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.9 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the World Bank's October report, the population is approximately 4.2 million, the estimate the Panamanian government uses. The Ministry of Health estimates 69.7 percent of the population is Catholic and 18 percent evangelical Protestant. Episcopalian and Methodist bishops state their communities have 11,000 and 1,500 members, respectively. 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 Arab and Pakistani origin. The Baha'i community reports 6,000 members; the Buddhist community 3,000 members; and the Lutheran Church 1,000 members. Smaller 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, Pentecostals, and Rastafarians. Baptists and Methodists derive their membership in large part from the African Antillean and expatriate communities.

The Rastafarian community is estimated at 850 members, but according to a community leader, the numbers are on the decline because many young Rastafarians are leaving the religion. Most Rastafarians live in Colon City and La Chorrera. Indigenous religions, including Ibeorgun (prevalent among the Guna community), Mama Tata and Mama Chi (prevalent among the Ngobe Bugle community), and Embera (prevalent among the Embera community), are found in their respective indigenous communities located throughout the country. There is also a small number of Babalaos associated with Cuba's Santeria religion, which is based on Yoruba religious traditions.

## **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 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 associations, 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 (MOG) 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 MOG approves the registration, the religious association must record the MOG'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 grant government 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), Muslim Congregation of Colon, Muslim Congregation of Panama City, Muslim Congregation of Cocle Province, Muslim Congregation of Chiriqui Province, Jewish Kol Shearith Israel Congregation, Jewish Shevet Ahim Congregation, Jewish Beth El Congregation, Baptist Church, Church of Jesus Christ, Hossana Evangelical Church, Casa de Oracion (house of prayer) Cristiana Evangelical Church, Pentecostal Church, Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church, Crossroads Christian Church, and Ministry of the Family Christian Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Rastafarian Congregation is not registered.

By law, indigenous tribes have control of their own autonomous lands within the country, which are called *comarcas* (counties). The oldest one, established in 1938, belongs to the Guna Yala tribe. This autonomy allows them to practice their religions and cultural traditions without interference from the state.

By law, 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 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 simply because they are not a member of that particular religion. Students of a faith separate from their educational institution are allowed to practice their religion freely.

Vaccinations are encouraged as a health issue but are not mandatory. The law does not require students to show proof of vaccination before they are allowed to register at either public or private schools.

Immigration law grants foreign religious workers temporary missionary worker visas 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 issued six-year visas because of the constitutional provision allowing all religions to worship freely, with no limitation other than “respect for Christian morality.” Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim clergy, 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, the MOG-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**

In September, a group of Babalaos practicing the Yoruba (Cuban Santeria) religion submitted a request to the Citizenship Participation Office at the National Assembly to pass a law recognizing them as a religious denomination. According to Ministry of Government sources, this request was contrary to normal legal procedures, which require registration requests to be first submitted to their ministry. The National Assembly did not act on this request by year’s end, when the assembly was on a constitutionally mandated recess.

Rastafarian representatives continued to state the group did not plan to register for legal status; they said the community was small and met informally at individual homes because there were no formal places of worship.

Catholic schools continued to represent the majority of parochial education institutions. According to a Ministry of Education official, non-Catholic religious schools received equal consideration regarding government grants, stating the government provided more funds to Catholic schools than other religious schools because there were more of them. Privately, however, some non-Catholic groups continued to state the government provided preferential distribution of the two-year cycle subsidies to small Catholic-run private schools for salaries and operating expenses.

According to Eduardo Leblanc, the new ombudsman appointed in August, there were no religious discrimination claims submitted to the government during the year and none pending from previous years.

The government continued to invite primarily Catholic clergy to conduct religious invocations at public government events, including the openings of the National Assembly on January 2 and July 1. On August 4, during a live press conference, Ministry of Health (MINSa) officials invited clergy from different denominations to pray for COVID-19 victims and their relatives. A Catholic priest, an evangelical Protestant pastor, and a rabbi led the prayers. On October 12, MINSa invited members of the Inter-Religious Institute to sign an agreement declaring that the different denominations would work together with health representatives to support contact tracing, recording health statistics, and reach out to patients to give moral and psychological support. In December, the institute received news from MINSa that it did not have enough funds to provide a free hot line to be used by all religious groups belonging to the institute. Different denominations would have to conduct volunteer services with their own resources.

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

According to their community leader, young Rastafarians found their public and private sector employment prospects hampered by discrimination against the wearing of dreadlocks and traditional Rastafarian attire, and therefore, some decided to leave the religion.

The Interreligious Institute of Panama, an interfaith committee made up of representatives of the 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 virtually 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, as well as sharing best practices on helping their congregations cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. According to several members of the Inter-Religious Institute, evangelical Protestant churches continued to decide against becoming members of the institute. According to institute officials, two of the three Jewish congregations in the country also declined to join the institute when it was originally founded.

In July, the Jewish “Conciencia Viva” (Live Consciousness) movement organized a virtual interfaith event commemorating the 26th anniversary of the terrorist suicide bombing of an Alas Chiricanas flight in which 20 persons lost their lives, the majority of them members of the country’s Jewish community and whose community was reportedly the target of the attack. Members of the Jewish community as well as non-Jewish guests attended the ceremony.

In January, clergy from a variety of religious groups conducted a joint prayer during a nationally televised ceremony commemorating the 20th anniversary of the handover of the Panama Canal. In August, MINSA authorities invited Inter-Religious Institute representatives to join them during a nationally televised press conference covering COVID-19 issues to encourage their congregations to follow the government’s health protocols.

On November 3, to celebrate national Independence Day, leaders of the Inter-Religious Institute gave remarks and prayed during a nationally televised Catholic Mass held at the National Cathedral, alongside the Papal Nuncio and the Archbishop of Panama.

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

In October, embassy officials met virtually with the new ombudsman, Eduardo Leblanc, to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and the equal treatment of all religious groups, including religious minorities.

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