

TIMOR-LESTE 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship and of religious instruction. There is no official state religion. Religious organizations may register with the government under the regulations provided for nonprofit corporate bodies. Religious minority groups continued to report instances in which civil servants rejected marriage and birth certificates issued by religious organizations other than the Roman Catholic Church. In November, the Minister of Justice presented options to the Council of Ministers to amend the civil code to register all forms of marriages recognized by the law, including those submitted by non-Catholics. Muslim religious leaders continued to express concerns about discriminatory practices in civil service hiring. As part of its annual budget, the government allocated five million dollars for distribution among the country's three Catholic dioceses in line with the terms of its concordat with the Holy See. Non-Catholic groups reported tensions regarding unequal allocation of government funds, since non-Catholic religious groups needed to apply for funding from a separate source instead of receiving a dedicated budget allocation. Government leaders continued to meet with religious leaders as part of the government's broader engagement with civil society. In July, the Dili Diocese and the Ministry of Tourism agreed to reopen the Mount Ramelau Sanctuary for visitors.

Minority religious groups generally reported religious tolerance in the country, but some minority groups said strong societal pressure to remain in the Catholic Church, particularly from family or community members, continued.

U.S. embassy officials engaged regularly with government officials, including in the Office of the Prime Minister, on religious freedom issues, including discrimination in civil service hiring, recognition of religious minority documentation, and budget allocations to minority religious groups. The embassy continued to fund programs to promote religious freedom and the preservation of religious sites.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.4 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2015 census, 97.6 percent of the population is Catholic, approximately 2 percent Protestant, and less than 1 percent Muslim.

Protestant denominations include the Assemblies of God, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Christian Vision Church. There are also several small nondenominational Protestant congregations. Many citizens retain animistic beliefs and practices along with their monotheistic religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship and specifies, "Religious denominations are separated from the State." It also prohibits discrimination based on religious beliefs and provides for both the right to conscientious objection and freedom to teach any religion. The constitution protects freedom of religion in the event of a declaration of a state of siege or state of emergency.

There is no official state religion; however, the constitution commends the Catholic Church for its participation in the country's liberation efforts. A concordat between the government and the Holy See establishes a legal framework for cooperation, grants the Catholic Church autonomy in establishing and running schools, provides tax benefits, safeguards the Church's historical and cultural heritage, and acknowledges the right of its foreign missionaries to serve in the country.

Religious organizations that conduct religious services but do not engage in other activities do not need to register with the government and may obtain tax-exempt status from the Ministry of Finance. Religious organizations seeking to open private schools or provide other community services must submit articles of association and other relevant documentation to register as nonprofit corporate bodies through the Ministry of Justice's National Directorate for Registry and Notary Services (DNRN). The law requires a separate registration with the Ministry of Interior for associations with primarily foreign members, including religious organizations, which must submit their articles of incorporation, proof they have the means to carry out their activities, and the name of a designated representative. To receive a tax identification number, organizations must register first with the Ministry of Justice and then bring that registration to the Service for Registration and Verification of Businesses, the business registration agency. The DNRN then issues a certificate and legally charters the organization.

The Ministry of Education classifies religious study as an elective subject in public schools. Most schools in the country are public, although the Catholic Church also operates private schools. Non-Catholic students may attend Catholic schools. Religious classes are compulsory in private Catholic schools.

Timorese chaplains serve in the armed forces. The law states, “Foreigners cannot provide religious assistance to the defense and security forces, except in cases of absolute need and urgency.” Foreign citizen missionaries and other religious figures are exempt from paying normal residence and visa fees. Visa regulations are the same for all foreign religious workers, regardless of religious affiliation.

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

Government Practices

Muslim and Protestant religious minority leaders again reported that notaries public rejected marriage and birth certificates from religious organizations other than the Catholic Church as supporting documentation required for registering for schools and other official acts. The leaders stated this occurred on an ad hoc rather than systematic basis, and authorities resolved the incidents by addressing them with the notarial office director. The notary service issued birth certificates to minority religious community members, but not marriage certificates, according to the president of the National Islamic Council. Members of non-Catholic religious groups, however, had the option to marry in a civil ceremony witnessed by a notary public, according to a Ministry of Justice official. Registrations of births and marriages with the government continued to be available, but civil registration rates remained relatively low in comparison to registration for religious certificates. Protestant and Muslim leaders continued to engage the Offices of the President and Prime Minister as well as the National Parliament to recognize non-Catholic certificates. In November, Minister of Justice Manuel Carceres da Costa presented options to the Council of Ministers to amend the civil code to register all forms of marriages recognized by the law, including from non-Catholic religious groups.

Muslim religious leaders continued to express concerns about discriminatory practices in civil service hiring. They said some Muslim job candidates whose names might be identified with their religion were being discriminated against during the screening process.

As part of its annual budget, the Office of the Prime Minister provided a budget allocation of five million dollars to the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Timor-Leste for distribution among the country's three Catholic dioceses. The terms of the concordat with the Holy See governed the allocations. The direct budget allocations to the Catholic Church again caused some tension with non-Catholic religious groups, according to minority religious leaders, who said the funding significantly favored the Catholic Church. Catholics and all other religious groups could apply, along with other organizations, for part of a separate \$3.54 million government fund set aside for civil society organizations during the year. According to an official in the Office of the Prime Minister, the fund supported separate construction requests from a Hindu group for the rehabilitation of a Hindu temple and a Catholic group for the reconstruction of a Catholic church as well as projects from secular NGOs.

Several Catholic and Islamic holidays were also national holidays. Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak issued public statements offering compliments for Idul Fitri (Eid al-Fitr) and wishes for a marvelous Christmas.

The government continued to consult religious leaders as part of broader engagement with civil society.

In July, the Dili Diocese and the Ministry of Tourism agreed to reopen the Mount Ramelau Sanctuary, a religious tourism site that had been closed for visitors due to COVID-19.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Leaders of the Catholic Church and longstanding Protestant and Muslim communities reported continued positive cooperation and relationships among religious groups. An interfaith working group worked to identify some religious sites as religious tourism sites to raise awareness of these sites' religious and historical significance.

Minority religious groups generally reported religious tolerance in the country, but some minority groups said strong societal pressure to remain in the Catholic Church persisted. Some minority religious leaders stated that their members had been assailed by family and community members because of their religious beliefs.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials engaged regularly with government officials, including from the Office of the Prime Minister, on religious issues, such as discrimination in civil service hiring, recognition of religious minority documentation, and budget allocations to different minority groups.

The embassy continued to fund programs to promote religious freedom and the preservation of religious sites. It supported a public-private partnership to attract investment to maintain Cristo Rei, a famous statue of Jesus located in Dili. It also supported a faith-based tourism working group that focused on promoting religious tourism in the country, preserving religious sites, and promoting religious tolerance.

For International Religious Freedom Day on January 16, the embassy posted a message on Facebook emphasizing the importance of promoting religious freedom that reached over 2,600 persons.