

# **TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religious belief and practice, including worship. It prohibits discrimination based on religion. Laws prohibit actions that incite religious hatred and violence. In September the High Court repealed the law that had criminalized same-sex sexual conduct between consenting adults. Some religious organizations said they supported the change in law on human rights grounds; others stated it infringed on their religious freedom. The government's national security policy continued to limit the number of long-term foreign missionaries to 35 per registered religious group at any given time.

The government-funded Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), representing diverse denominations within Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and the Baha'i Faith, again advocated for the importance of religious tolerance. The IRO focused its efforts on marches, press conferences, and statements regarding tolerance for religious diversity and related issues.

U.S. embassy representatives met with senior government officials from the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM (the Caribbean Community) Affairs (MFCA) to discuss the importance of the government's equal protection of religion under the law. In July embassy representatives met with the new IRO leadership to discuss interfaith cooperation and the value of religious tolerance. Embassy representatives conducted outreach to religious group leaders, including Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Orisha, and Spiritual/Shouter Baptists, as part of its efforts to promote interfaith tolerance. Embassy representatives delivered remarks underlining the value of religious plurality at a number of events. In June the embassy hosted an iftar during which the Charge d'Affaires and the president of the largest Muslim association in the country delivered remarks highlighting the value of religious freedom and tolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.2 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 26.5 percent of the population is Protestant, including 12 percent Pentecostal or evangelical Christian, 5.7 percent Anglican, 4.1 percent Seventh-day Adventist, 2.5 percent Presbyterian or Congregational, 1.2 percent Baptist, 0.7 percent Methodist, and 0.3 percent

Moravian. An additional 21.6 percent is Roman Catholic, 18.2 percent Hindu, 5 percent Muslim, and 1.5 percent Jehovah's Witnesses. Traditional Caribbean religious groups with African roots include the Spiritual/Shouter Baptists, who represent 5.7 percent of the population, and the Orisha, who incorporate elements of West African spiritualism and Christianity, at 0.9 percent. According to the census, 2.2 percent of the population has no religious affiliation, 11.1 percent does not state a religious affiliation, and 7.5 percent lists their affiliation as "other," which includes several small Christian groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as well as Baha'is, Rastafarians, Buddhists, and Jews.

The religious composition of the two islands varies distinctly. On Trinidad, the island with 95 percent of the country's total population, those of African descent make up 32 percent of the population and are predominantly Christian. A small, primarily Sunni Muslim community is concentrated in and around Port of Spain, along the east-west corridor of northern Trinidad, and in certain areas of central and south Trinidad. Those of East Indian descent constitute 37 percent of the population, approximately half of whom are Hindu, in addition to Muslims, Presbyterians, and Catholics. The population of Tobago is 85 percent of African descent and predominantly Christian.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religious belief and observance, including worship. It recognizes the existence of basic fundamental human rights and freedoms and prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The law prohibits acts of sedition and seditious intent, which includes engendering or promoting feelings of ill will towards, hostility to, or contempt for any class of inhabitants, including on the basis of religion.

A fine of up to 1,000 Trinidad and Tobago dollars (TT) (\$150) may be levied for expressions of hatred directed specifically against a person's religion, including any "riotous, violent, indecent, or disorderly behavior in any place of divine worship," or attacks, ridicule, or vilification of another person's religion in a manner likely to provoke a breach of the peace. The country's antiblephemy law states, "Any person who is convicted of any act or an attempt to commit blasphemy, writing and publishing, or printing and publishing, any blasphemous

libel... is liable to a fine and to imprisonment for two years”; however, the law is not enforced.

Judicial review, with the power of the court to modify or enforce orders, is available to those who claim to be victims of religious discrimination. Claimants may also appeal a court’s decision.

To receive tax-exempt donations or gifts of land, perform marriages, or receive visas for foreign missionaries, religious groups must register with the government. To register, groups must demonstrate they are nonprofit organizations, be in operation for at least one year, and submit a request for charitable status to the Ministry of Finance and the Economy. The request must include a certificate or articles of incorporation, the constitution, and bylaws of the organization, and the most recently audited financial statements. Religious groups have the same rights and obligations as most legal entities, regardless of their registration status. They may, for example, own land and hire employees, and they are likewise liable for property taxes and government-mandated employee benefits.

Chaplains representing the different faiths present in the country may visit prisons to perform religious acts and minister to prisoners.

The government permits religious instruction in public schools, allocating time each week during which any religious group may provide an instructor at the parent’s request for an adherent in the school. Attendance at these classes is voluntary, and the religious groups represented are diverse. The law states public schools may not refuse admission to individuals based on religious beliefs, and no child is required to attend any religious observance or receive instruction in religious subjects as a condition of admission or continued attendance in a public school. Immunization is required of all children entering school. While parents may enroll their children in religiously affiliated private schools as an alternative to public education, the law does not permit homeschooling. Private schools, also called “assisted schools,” receive a combination of government and private funding for their facilities.

The government subsidizes religiously affiliated public schools, including schools operated by Christian, Hindu, and Muslim groups. The government allots primary school funding on a per-pupil basis, with the amount varying each year. For secondary schools, the government allots funding based on budget requests submitted by each school.

A 2017 law raised the legal age of marriage to 18, amending previous marriage laws governing the marriage age for different religious groups.

Foreign missionaries must meet standard requirements for entry visas and must represent a registered religious group in the country. Permits are valid for a maximum period of three years, at a cost of TT 500 (\$74) per year. Missionaries may not remain longer than three years per visit but may re-enter after a year's absence.

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

### **Government Practices**

On September 20, the High Court issued a ruling repealing the laws that had criminalized homosexual sex between consenting adults. Religious organizations had mixed reactions to the ruling, with many fearing it infringed on their religious freedom, and a smaller number supporting the move on human rights grounds. In response to the initial ruling in April, religious leaders, who stated they represented 90 percent of the country's Christians, Hindus, and Muslims, asked the government in a news conference to uphold marriage to be defined as only occurring only between a man and a woman. Convened by Catholic Archbishop of Port-of-Spain Jason Gordon, the religious leaders called on the government to amend the country's Marriage Act to ensure that only a biological man and a biological woman could marry. The leaders also called on the government not to amend the country's equal opportunity act to accommodate LGBT individuals. The act prohibits specific forms of discrimination but does not include gay men and lesbians as protected classes. By year's end, the government did not respond to their request.

Media reported in August that members of the governing political party, the People's National Movement (PNM), performed a skit at a party event during which an actor removed a yellow sari from an actress to reveal a PNM T-shirt underneath. Hindus stated that the skit insulted their religion. Party officials initially downplayed the allegations; however, Prime Minister Keith Rowley later apologized to the Hindu community after he learned of the skit's religious significance.

The government provided budgetary support for IRO activities, an interfaith coordinating committee representing approximately 25 religious groups, including numerous denominations within Christianity, as well as Islam, Hinduism, and the

Orisha and Baha'i faiths. Leaders from five religious groups – Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Orisha, and Baha'i – continued to deliver invocations at government-sponsored events, including the opening of parliament and the annual court term. According to the new IRO president, Knolly Clarke, a senior clergyman of the Anglican Church, the government maintained its previous levels of engagement and financing of religious organizations during the year.

Members of the government and officials from both political parties continued to participate in ceremonies and holidays of various religious groups and emphasized religious tolerance and harmony in their remarks. Prime Minister Keith Rowley issued public messages for Easter, Ramadan, and Diwali that underscored religious freedom, diversity, and unity. In his Eid al-Fitr message, he said, "Let us also adopt the sense of community and brotherhood that characterized the season of Ramadan and the celebration of Eid." At public invocations organized or run by the government, however, Christian references to God and to Christian beliefs, without equal recognition of other religions, were common – including during President Paula Mae Weeks' swearing-in ceremony in the summer.

The government continued to limit the number of long-term foreign missionaries to 35 per registered religious group. Missionaries in excess of the 35 individuals could remain in the country a maximum of 30 days. IRO members continued to state that the government equitably applied the law; however, some international religious groups continued to state more than 35 missionaries could remain in the country if they affiliated with more than one registered group, including nonprofit groups and charities. The IRO's former president, a Hindu, said the law continued to constrain Hindus, who had few missionaries but wanted them to stay longer than the three-year legal limit.

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

In February the government arrested individuals who allegedly planned to carry out a terror plot to destabilize Carnival celebrations. Following their arrests, a local imam, Sheraz Ali, made a video and gave press interviews stating he and other members of the mosque had cooperated with police during the search and police officers had acted very professionally. The video was in response to reports that police had found guns and ammunition and had entered the mosque with dogs and caused damage. Ali made a public appeal to focus on the facts of the investigation and to stop spreading false news. Some local imams said the negative social media commentary regarding the incident had slandered their communities.

Media sources reported that when a Muslim woman arrived for her first day of work at Lakshmi Girls' Hindu College, a school official told her to either to remove her hijab or leave. She said the school later contacted her and apologized.

The IRO, with a founding mandate “to speak to the nation on matters of social, moral, and spiritual concern,” continued to advocate for matters of religious concern. IRO efforts included marches and press conferences, as well as statements regarding religious tolerance and related issues. In August the Universal Peace Federation for Trinidad and Tobago, together with members of the IRO, led a march for peace simultaneously with representatives of 120 nations who carried out their own peace walk in celebration of world peace. In his first press release issued as the new IRO President, Knolly Clarke said, “We live in very trying times and the unity we share as religious heads of this culturally diverse society must impact on the example we set for harmony and togetherness in moving our country forward.”

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

U.S. embassy representatives met with senior government officials from the MFCA to discuss the importance of the government's equal protection of religion under the law.

The embassy hosted a roundtable with IRO members to discuss interfaith cooperation and religious tolerance among nonmember and member representatives of the IRO.

U.S. embassy officials engaged various religious groups to promote religious freedom and tolerance. The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy representatives met with leaders of various religious organizations and visited a number of religious sites.

The embassy continued to engage actively with the local Muslim community. In June the embassy hosted an iftar during which the Charge d'Affaires and the president of the largest Muslim association in the country delivered remarks highlighting the value of religious freedom and tolerance. The Charge d'Affaires thanked the community for working with the embassy on messaging campaigns to counter violent extremism, urging Muslim leaders to speak out as the recognized voices of the community. He pledged to continue outreach to the community. The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials also attended an iftar at the Santa

Cruz Mosque. A senior embassy official spoke at the annual meeting of the National Muslim Women's Organization of Trinidad and Tobago; attended the funeral of a well-known member of the Muslim community; visited a mosque community in Tobago; and spoke at the annual event of the Madinah House, a shelter run by a board of Muslim women.

In July the embassy hosted a meeting with the newly appointed head of the IRO, Knolly Clarke, to discuss religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation among nonmember and member representatives of the IRO.

In October the Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials visited the Swaha Divya Ashram in the central part of the island of Trinidad as part of the embassy's outreach with religious minorities.

Embassy staff met regularly with Muslim religious and civil society leaders for discussions on topics including religious tolerance and countering violent extremism. Embassy staff also continued working with religious groups, such as the National Muslim Women's Organization and the Anjuman Sunnat ul Jamaat Association, and delivered remarks on the importance of religious diversity at conventions of the Trinidad Muslim League and the Ahmadi Muslim Community.

The embassy utilized social media for outreach on the value of the freedom to worship according to one's conscience. Messages featured embassy-sponsored events and meetings in support of religious freedom and tolerance for religious diversity.