

BELIZE 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, freedom to change religion or belief, and freedom to express one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. Discrimination on the basis of religion is prohibited. Nondenominational "spirituality" classes, including morals, values, and world religions, are taught in public schools. While there is no official rule governing students' ability to opt out of these sessions, parents may decide their children will not attend these classes. A dispute over church representation in the senate caused a division among evangelical Protestants, leading to the formation of the National Evangelical Association (NEA) as an offshoot of the Belize Association of Evangelical Churches (AEC). As the NEA was not officially recognized by the government, it could not contribute to the choice of church representation in the senate. A Christian nongovernmental organization (NGO) continued to manage the only prison in the country, which uses religion as the basis of prisoner rehabilitation.

Leaders in the Council of Churches said certain evangelical Protestant pastors acted irresponsibly in radio and television broadcasts attacking religious leaders who supported an August Supreme Court ruling that found parts of the criminal code criminalizing consensual same-sex activities unconstitutional. A representative from the council said there was "a need for respect and responsibility" in exercising freedom of religion.

U.S. embassy representatives interacted with a wide spectrum of religious groups to reinforce the importance of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 354,000 (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2010 census (the most recent), the Roman Catholic Church is the largest religious group, accounting for 40 percent of the population. Protestants make up 31.8 percent, including Pentecostals (8.5 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (5.5 percent), Anglicans (4.7 percent), Mennonites (3.8 percent), Baptists (3.6 percent), Methodists (2.9 percent), and the Church of the Nazarene (2.8 percent). Jehovah's Witnesses make up 1.7 percent of the population, while other religious groups, which include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Rastafarians, the Salvation Army,

and Bahais, together constitute 10.9 percent. The percentage of the population not belonging to any listed religious affiliation is 15.6.

No religious group is a majority in any of the country's six districts. Catholics live throughout the country. Mennonites and Pentecostals live 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 governor general appoints one of the 12 members of the senate following the advice of the Council of Churches and the AEC. 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.

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

Religious groups must register with the official Companies Registry 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 onetime registration fee of 295 Belize dollars (\$148) and a yearly fee of five Belize dollars (\$2.50). Requirements for registration are a memorandum of association with the government, which sets out 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, but other church-owned buildings occupied on a regular basis, such as clergy residences, are not 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.

Foreign religious workers require a religious worker's visa to enter the country and proselytize. They must also purchase a religious worker's permit.

The public school curriculum includes weekly nondenominational "spirituality" classes including 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. Most public elementary schools, high schools, and some colleges are church-managed. Catholic and other Christian holidays are routinely observed.

The defense force retains a Christian chaplain. Clergy from different religious groups have applied and regularly been granted access to serve inmates at the Belize Central Prison.

Government Practices

In late 2015, a dispute over church representation in the senate caused a division among members of the Belize Association of Evangelical Churches (AEC), leading to the formation of a new group called the National Evangelical Association (NEA). As the NEA was not officially recognized by the government, it could not contribute to the choice of the church representative in the senate.

The government continued to own a single prison, managed by a Christian NGO, the Kolbe Foundation. The foundation coordinated religious instruction for inmates. Religion formed the basis of the prisoner rehabilitation program. Religious leaders from varying denominations visited the prison to hold services at a nondenominational chapel within the prison. The prison respected dietary restrictions for prisoners from various religious backgrounds.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Leaders of the Council of Churches said certain evangelical pastors acted irresponsibly in their radio and television broadcasts, attacking religious leaders who supported an August Supreme Court ruling that found parts of the criminal code criminalizing consensual same-sex activities unconstitutional. A representative from the council said there was “a need for respect and responsibility” in practicing religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives interacted with a wide spectrum of religious groups to reinforce the importance of religious freedom.