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Guyana

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There were, however, reports of detention of foreign missionaries affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 83,000 square miles and a population of 766,000. Data from a 2002 census on religious affiliation indicated that approximately 57 percent of the population was Christian, broken down as follows: 17 percent Pentecostal, 8 percent Roman Catholic, 7 percent Anglican, 5 percent Seventh-day Adventist, and 20 percent other Christian groups. Approximately 28 percent of the population was Hindu, 7 percent was Muslim (mostly Sunni), and 2 percent practiced other beliefs, including members of the Rastafarian Movement and the Baha'i Faith. An estimated 4 percent of the population does not profess any religion. Some religious groups claimed higher membership than reflected by the 2002 census.

The country is ethnically diverse, reflecting East Indian, African, Chinese, and European ancestry, as well as a significant indigenous population. Most religious groups can claim membership from a cross section of ethnic groups, with two exceptions: most Hindus are Indo-Guyanese, and nearly all Rastafarians are Afro-Guyanese.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The law protects the right of individuals to choose and change their religion and to interpret religious beliefs for themselves. Members of all religious groups worshipped freely. There is no state or otherwise dominant religion.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Christian--Good Friday, Easter, Easter Monday, and Christmas; Hindu--Phagwah (festival welcoming spring) and Diwali (festival of lights); Islamic--You-Man-Nabi (birth of the Prophet Muhammad) and Eid Al-Adha (feast of sacrifice).

While the government recognized religious groups of all faiths, they must register with the government to receive formal recognition. Religious groups seeking to establish operations must first obtain permission from the Ministry of Home Affairs. In the past access to Amerindian areas required permission from the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs and the Ministry of Home Affairs; however, under the 2006 revision of the Amerindian Act, only the permission of the local village council is required. There was no formal monitoring of religious groups.

Both public and religiously affiliated schools exist, and parents were free to send their children to the school of their choice without sanction or restriction. The government imposed no requirements regarding religion for any official or nonofficial purposes.

The Guyana Defense Force (GDF) coordinated with civilian religious groups to provide personnel with access to religious services. Leaders of all major religious groups conducted prayer services and counseling, although generally only Christian sermons were given on GDF bases. Although no official GDF policy required attendance at religious services, anecdotal evidence from GDF officers suggested that individual commanders required attendance at some religious programs. Membership in a particular religion did not confer any specific advantage or disadvantage; however, general military practice tended to favor Christians.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. Mormons, however, reported detention of their foreign missionaries.

On September 2, 2009, police briefly detained approximately 40 foreign Mormon missionaries. Prior to their detention, the missionaries received an official notice requiring them to appear before a court of law for a hearing on their immigration status. Before this hearing took place, they were detained and ordered to depart the country. After President Jagdeo was informed of the situation via diplomatic channels, he instructed the missionaries to depart the country within one month, which they did. The news media reported that the government was wary of the church's independent charity work in the interior of the country and of the missionaries' alleged close relationship with opposition figures. There were no other reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In May 2010 the U.S. embassy sponsored a Muslim speaker from the United States who met with Muslim academics, businessmen, imams, women, and youth regarding religious tolerance, pluralism, and religious expression in a diverse society.

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