

# **TIMOR-LESTE 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship and of religious instruction. Police recruits are trained in nondiscrimination. The government registers religious organizations under the regulations provided for nonprofit corporate bodies. Two students were expelled from a public high school, reportedly because of their religious practices. Religious groups reported incidents in which civil servants refused service to members of religious minorities.

Minority religious leaders reported intimidation and physical violence against members and damage to their physical property.

The U.S. embassy engaged regularly with government officials on religious freedom. The embassy hosted a roundtable with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom in the country.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.2 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2010 census, 96.8 percent of the population is Catholic, 2.2 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 also 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 on the basis of religious beliefs and guarantees both the right to conscientious objection and freedom to teach any religion. The Ministry of Education defines religious study as an optional subject in public schools. The

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constitution protects freedom of religion even 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. In August the government signed a diplomatic agreement with the Holy See that 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 the Church to use foreign missionaries in the country.

Police cadets receive training in equal enforcement of the law and preventing discrimination, including discrimination based on religion.

The Ministry of Justice registers religious organizations as nonprofit corporate bodies through its National Directorate for Registry and Notary Services. The law requires additional registration with the Ministry of the Interior for associations with primarily foreign members, including religious associations. For tax benefits, the Ministry of Finance requires organizations to register. Forms and guidelines are on the ministry website.

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.

### **Government Practices**

Two students from Lautem district were reportedly expelled from their public schools for refusing to attend school on Saturday because of their religious beliefs. The public school week runs from Monday through Saturday, which conflicts with observance of the Sabbath for some religious groups. This was the third year in a row that such expulsions occurred. In Oecusse, a Protestant religious leader said teachers in two schools threatened students with expulsion for participating in Protestant classes outside of school hours and premises. In the Oecusse case, the government responded by ensuring the students were allowed to remain in school and reprimanding the teachers for their threats.

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Religious leaders reported ongoing incidents of individual public servants refusing service to minority religious members. For example, police officers sometimes did not reply to minority religious members' attempts to report threats and violence. In addition, clerks sometimes refused to register students from minority religious groups at schools.

Religious organizations reported no difficulties in registering with the government through either the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Interior.

The government provided an annual budget allocation to each of the three Catholic dioceses. The direct budget allocations to the dioceses caused some resentment among non-Catholic religious organizations, according to religious leaders. Religious organizations could apply, along with other organizations, for government funding set aside for civil society organizations.

The government coordinated an interreligious forum for religious leaders. Minority religious leaders stated participation in the forum provided a mechanism for raising issues of religious freedom both with other religious groups and with government interlocutors and had proven valuable for addressing concerns in a timely manner, including the threatened expulsion of students in Oecusse. Some leaders, however, indicated they were not aware of the forum. Others said the forum had become overly politicized and too focused on the funding available to religious organizations.

Minority religious leaders reported the government continued to reject marriage and birth certificates from religious organizations other than the Catholic Church as supporting documentation for registering for schools and other official acts.

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

The Catholic Church remained the most influential religious organization in society. Several Catholic holidays were also national holidays, a practice that was further enshrined by the bilateral accord between the government and the Holy See, and Catholic religious leaders presided over several government ceremonies, including blessing the newly-received domestic airplane.

Minority religious groups operating in rural areas reported their churches and members encountered harassment and physical threats. Church members stated these tensions sometimes escalated into physical violence such as rock throwing,

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property damage, and other threatening behavior towards members. In Ermera, a group, reportedly instigated by the local Catholic priest, destroyed the expanded meeting room for a Protestant religious group. In this case, the community rallied around the targeted group to reconstruct the facility, and the group saw an expansion in membership. In a similar incident in the same district, a different organization reported a group led by a neighboring Catholic priest destroyed work in progress on a church in September. The case was still pending in the district court as of the end of the year, after the church rejected the court's suggestion of mediation to resolve the case.

Many religious organizations, both majority and minority, received significant funding from foreign donors. Muslim leaders stated there were no reports of discrimination against the Muslim community.

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

The U.S. embassy underlined the importance of respecting religious freedom in many interactions, including with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, the national police, and the Ministry of Justice.

In November the embassy hosted a group of religious leaders to discuss religious freedom, tolerance, and the positive and negative experiences they and members of their communities had with the government and society. Embassy representatives met with leaders of the various religious groups throughout the year on a variety of issues, including the well-being of their faith communities. In December three media outlets published the Ambassador's editorial on religious freedom and tolerance.