

BELIZE 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom to express one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. Nondenominational "spirituality" classes, including morals, values, and world religions, are taught in public schools; opt-outs are possible. The government continued to engage religious groups in the country on its stated commitment to fostering tolerance for religious minorities and for protecting religious freedom and equal protection under the law.

Religious groups routinely collaborated with international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to carry out missionary work in the country. Thirteen religious radio stations continued to operate countrywide. The interfaith Belize Chaplain Service (BCS) continued to promote several initiatives, such as counseling services for relatives of crime victims and for police officers, with the stated objective to provide professional, multifaith, compassionate pastoral care to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of the public.

Embassy representatives met with government officials to emphasize the importance of the government's continued engagement with a wide spectrum of religious groups in the country, including with Christians and non-Christian religious minorities. The embassy invited representatives of religious groups to participate in embassy programming and outreach and to reinforce the role of religious groups in promoting respect for religious diversity and tolerance. The embassy also used social media to promote broad messages of religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 386,000 (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2010 census, the Roman Catholic Church is the largest religious group, accounting for 40 percent of the population. Protestants make up 32 percent, including Pentecostals (8 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (5 percent), Anglicans (5 percent), Mennonites (4 percent), Baptists (4 percent), Methodists (3 percent), and the Church of the Nazarene (3 percent). Jehovah's Witnesses make up 2 percent of the population, while other religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Rastafarians, The Salvation Army, and Baha'is, together constitute 11

percent. Approximately 15 percent of the population does affiliate with a listed religious organization.

No religious group is a majority in any of the country's six districts. Catholics reside throughout the country. Mennonites and Pentecostals reside 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 Council of Churches, a board including representatives from several major Christian denominations, and the Belize Association of Evangelical Churches (BAEC), together appoint one individual to the senate with the governor general's concurrence. 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. They do not include, however, the National Evangelical Association of Belize (NEAB), which split from the BAEC in 2015 over political differences, or any non-Christian denominations. The current “church” senator was appointed in November 2015. Senate transitions typically occur with a change in administration.

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

The law requires all religious groups to register with the official Companies Registry in the Ministry of the Attorney General in a process similar to that of a business. Registration permits the religious organization to operate legally in the country; receive state recognition; negotiate, sue, and be sued; own property; hire employees; and lend or borrow money. There is a one-time registration fee of 295

Belize dollars (\$150) and a yearly fee of five Belize dollars (\$3). Requirements for registration include a memorandum of association with the government delineating 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. Other church-owned buildings occupied on a regular basis, such as clergy residences, are not tax-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.

The public school curriculum includes weekly nondenominational "spirituality" classes incorporating morals and values. Government-aided church-run schools are allowed to teach lessons on world religions for students from kindergarten through sixth grade. While there is no official rule that governs a student's 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. Christian churches manage most public elementary schools, high schools, and some colleges. Schools routinely observe Catholic and other Christian holidays at the schools' discretion. Non-Christian religious groups run a few schools, such as the Muslim Community Primary School in Belize City.

The law grants respect for inmates' religious beliefs, and as such, inmates may participate in religious activities in prison. Religious leaders may request use of the chapel inside the facility and offer religious services to inmates. Prison authorities avoid requiring unnecessary work by prisoners on Sunday and other major Christian religious holidays (Christmas and Good Friday), and by prisoners recorded as belonging to other religions on their recognized day of religious observance. The law allows religious scriptures and other books of religious observance be made available to prisoners.

To enter the country and proselytize, foreign religious workers need a multi-entry visa, which costs 100 Belize dollars (\$50) and is valid for one year. Applicants must also purchase a religious worker's permit, costing 50 Belize dollars (\$25). The visas are renewable on an annual basis. Visa requirements include information on intended length of stay, location, funding for activity, and specific purpose. Members of all religious groups are eligible to obtain visas. While a

group does not need to be locally registered, recommendation by a locally registered religious group lends more credibility to the visa request, according to local authorities.

The Belize Defense Force retains a nondenominational chaplain and space for religious observance. With the prior consent of authorities, any religious group may use the space for worship.

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

Government Practices

The government continued to engage religious groups on fostering tolerance for religious minorities, protecting religious freedom, and ensuring equal protection under the law. Government engagement included meetings with the Council of Churches, Church Senator Ashley Rocke, and several other religious leaders.

The government-owned and financed central prison continued to run under the administration of a Catholic NGO, the Kolbe Foundation, providing policing and security, and helping ensure all prisoners had the right to practice their religion. Religious leaders from varying denominations visited the prison to hold services at a nondenominational chapel in the prison. Kolbe reported the prison continued to respect dietary restrictions for prisoners from various religious backgrounds. Several religious groups, including Anglicans, Methodists, Catholics, evangelical Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, Nazarenes, Mennonites, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Baptists, and the Church of Jesus Christ, continued to make frequent use of the access to clergy granted by the prison administration.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Local religious groups, especially from Protestant denominations, continued to affiliate with international NGOs and religious partners from the United States and Canada to carry out missionary work in the country. They held joint conferences and outreach activities to address health, poverty, and education issues.

Thirteen registered religious-based radio stations continued to operate in the country. Some sources said evangelical Protestant groups continued to own and run most of the stations. Other stations included one Catholic, two Mennonite, and one Pentecostal radio station.

The interfaith BCS, which promotes respect for religious diversity and includes representatives from Methodist, Catholic, Anglican, Salvation Army, Chinese Christian Mission, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal Churches, as well as Muslim and Baha'i leaders, promoted several initiatives. These initiatives included counselling services for relatives of crime victims, with the objective to provide professional, multifaith, compassionate pastoral care to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of the public. BCS offered services to the central prison and the Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital staff, patients, and relatives. BCS ran the chapel at the hospital, offering weekly Sunday services and Muslim prayers on Friday.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives met with government officials to emphasize the importance of the government's continued engagement with a wide spectrum of religious groups in the country, including with Christians and non-Christian religious minorities.

The embassy invited religious leaders to participate in embassy programs and outreach and to reinforce the role of religious groups in promoting respect for religious diversity and tolerance. The embassy also used social media to promote broad messages of religious tolerance.