

TIMOR-LESTE 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees the right to freedom of worship and freedom of religious instruction. Police recruits are trained in non-discrimination. The government has the right to register religious organizations, but no guidelines for registration currently exist. There was one report that authorities denied a minority religious group the right to purchase land, purportedly because it was unregistered. Three students were expelled from a public high school, reportedly because of their religious practices. The government intervened but did not resolve the case.

Two newly established Protestant churches reported intimidation against members from community and family members that escalated into physical assault.

In August U.S. embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and expressed support for efforts to ensure religious freedom. Embassy representatives met with members of religious minorities to ascertain the experience of their faith communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.2 million (July 2014 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, 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 organized 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 while protecting the right to conscientious objection and freedom of religious instruction. While the nature of

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religious instruction is not addressed in the constitution or by law, in 2004 the Ministry of Education defined religious study as an optional subject in public schools. The constitution additionally protects certain freedoms, including freedom of religion, 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.

Police cadets receive training in equal enforcement of the law and nondiscrimination, including religious nondiscrimination.

The secretary of state for security has authority to register religious organizations; however, the agency has yet to develop registration procedures.

The law states that "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

Three students were expelled from their public schools, allegedly for their religious beliefs, and one church leader reported that authorities denied a land sale to his church because it was not registered.

For the second year in a row, students were reportedly expelled from their public schools because of their religious beliefs. A Seventh-day Adventist leader reported that in September teachers and staff of a public secondary school in Lospalos expelled three students because of the students' religious affiliation. The police reported that they were unaware of students being expelled because of religious affiliation but, in a system where the school week is Monday through Saturday, they knew of students expelled for missing multiple Saturdays. According to the church leader, following a meeting with local government officials, the Ministry of Education declared that it fully respected religious freedom, but it failed to reinstate the students.

A Protestant church reported that its attempt to purchase land for a new church was rejected by local and national authorities. Church members said the authorities

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stated the denial was because the church was not properly registered. The immigration and asylum law requires churches with primarily foreign members to register with the secretary of state for security.

The ban on foreigners providing religious services to defense and security forces did not unduly restrict the work of missionaries.

The government provided some funding to religious organizations to support activities and help in the construction or rehabilitation of places of worship, usually on the basis of a request for assistance. For example, the government funded requests from the Catholic Church and the main Dili mosque for new construction and building maintenance. Some Protestant leaders said that they had never been invited to take part in discussions about government support or to apply for funds. Others said they had never heard of government funding for religious development and had no intention of applying for it. The majority of funds for Protestant church building projects came from foreign donors.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Catholic Church retained significant influence in the political and cultural life of the country.

Minority religious groups operating in rural areas reported that their churches and members encountered harassment and physical threats. Church members stated these tensions had escalated into incidents of physical violence in remote rural communities. Some Protestant leaders reported individuals who converted to Protestant faiths encountered harassment by family, members of their community, and local leaders.

In August and September a foreign missionary who worked in a church in the town of Viqueque reported that members of a local Catholic youth group and a community leader went to her home and insisted that she seek approval from the Catholic Church to carry out religious work. The national police reportedly investigated the case and took her passport for violating the terms of her visa, which was for cultural exchange or scientific research. She stated that the national police accused her of violating immigration law and threatened to deport her but took no further action.

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One pending court case of societal abuse against Jehovah's Witnesses from 2013 remained in the judicial process.

Muslim leaders reported no discrimination.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In August U.S. embassy representatives met with the director general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation to share the 2013 International Religious Freedom report. The director general stated the government will continue its efforts to improve religious freedom in the country. In November the Charge d'Affaires discussed religious freedom and tolerance with a senior member of the Muslim community. Embassy representatives met with leaders of the Catholic Church and religious minorities to ascertain the experience of their faith communities.