

# **SURINAME 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion. Both the constitution and the penal code prohibit discrimination based on religion. Any violation may be brought before a court of justice. Religious groups seeking financial support from the government must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs. Limited government financial support for religious groups remained available through the Ministry of Home Affairs, primarily as a stipend for clergy. The government continued to pay wages for teachers and support staff of schools managed by religious organizations, as well as subsidies to cover operational costs and school supplies. Religious organizations, primarily evangelical Christian groups, protested government-implemented COVID-19 lockdowns as infringements on the right to religious freedom. In June, religious leaders from the principal interfaith organizations consulted with President Chandrikapersad Santokhi and other government officials on ways in which to resume in-person religious services. During the year, the Ministry of Home Affairs worked towards developing standards for religious training programs to gain government recognition. The standardized training developed with support of religious groups was designed to help the government determine who is clergy and the accuracy of the stipends they received. The President and other government officials noted the country's religious diversity and the importance of respect for that diversity during public speeches.

The Interreligious Council (IRIS) – an organization encompassing two Hindu and two Muslim groups, the Jewish community, and the Roman Catholic Church – continued to discuss interfaith activities and positions on government policies and their impact on society. IRIS collaborated with nonmember religious organizations such as the Committee of Christian Churches in Suriname, which comprises the Roman Catholic Church, the Moravian Church, the Lutheran Church, as well as the Protestant Church, on efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance. In March, leaders of the IRIS and the Committee of Christian Churches joined forces to promote vaccinations against the COVID-19 virus.

In meetings with government representatives, U.S. embassy officials continued to highlight U.S. government policy on the importance of protecting religious freedom and tolerance. One individual participated in an embassy-sponsored virtual exchange program on religious freedom.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 615,000 (midyear 2021). According to the 2012 census, the most recent available, approximately half of the population is Christian (26 percent Protestant, 22 percent Catholic, and 3 percent other Christian). Christian groups include Moravian, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, evangelical Protestant, Baptist, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Hindus are 22 percent of the population, including the Sanatan Dharm and the Arya Dewaker. Muslims, including Sunni and Ahmadi Muslims and the World Islamic Call Society, are 14 percent. The remaining 13 percent includes Baha'is, Jews, Buddhists, Brahma Kumaris, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and three Rastafarian organizations: the Aya Bingi Order, 12th Tribe, and Bobo Shanti.

Some Amerindian and Maroon populations, approximately 3 percent of the population, adhere to indigenous religions. Certain Amerindian groups, concentrated principally in the interior and to a lesser extent in coastal areas, practice shamanism through a medicine man (*piaiman*). Many Maroons, descendants of Africans who fled Dutch colonial plantations, worship nature. Persons of Amerindian and Maroon origin who identify as Christian often combine Christian practices with indigenous religious customs. Some Creoles in urban areas, as well as some Maroons, worship their ancestors through a rite called *wintie*.

There is some overlap between ethnicity and religion. The Hindustani-speaking population is primarily Hindu, while some ethnic Indians, Javanese, and Creoles practice Islam. Christianity crosses all ethnic backgrounds.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal Framework

The constitution states that everyone has freedom of religion, and individuals may not be discriminated against on the grounds of religion. Individuals may choose to change their religion. Any violation of religious freedom may be brought before a court of justice.

The penal code provides punishment for those who instigate hate or discrimination against persons based on religion or creed in any way. Those found guilty may be

sentenced to a prison term of no longer than one year and a fine of up to 25,000 Surinamese dollars (SRD) (\$1,300). In cases where an insult or act of hatred is instigated by more than one person, as part of an organization, or by a person who makes such statements habitually or as part of work, the punishment may include imprisonment of up to two years and fines of up to SRD 50,000 (\$2,600).

Religious groups must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs only if they seek financial support, including stipends for clergy, from the government. Registering with the ministry does not confer tax benefits. To register, religious groups must supply contact information, a history of their group, and addresses for houses of worship. Most religious groups are officially registered.

The law does not permit religious instruction in public schools. The government prohibits prayer groups in public schools. Private schools managed by religious groups include religious instruction in the curriculum. All students attending schools run by religious groups must take part in religious instruction, regardless of their religious background. Laws and government decrees do not permit parents to homeschool children for religious reasons.

The government funds salaries for all teachers and support staff in primary and junior secondary schools established and managed by various religious groups. Additionally, the schools receive a subsidy for their operational costs based on the number of students. The government also provides 90 percent of funding for books and other materials. Religious groups must provide the remaining funding, which includes construction costs, funding for school furniture, supplies, and additional maintenance expenses. Religious organizations administer approximately 50 percent of primary (ages 4-12) and junior secondary (ages 12-16) schools in the country. Religious organizations do not administer higher secondary schools (ages 16-19). The Catholic Diocese of Paramaribo, Moravian Church, and Hindu community administer most private schools. Through the Ministries of Education and Finance, the government provides a fee per registered child and pays teacher salaries to the religious organizations administering these schools.

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

### **Government Practices**

According to the Ministry of Social Affairs, the government attempted to meet its payment obligations to homes for children as well as the elderly administered by religious organizations but was often hampered by budgetary constraints and a

lengthy process for release of funding by the Ministry of Finance. The government, through the Ministry of Education, continued its subsidies to schools managed by religious organizations at the same level as prior years. The government prohibited schools receiving public funds from increasing school fees for the 2021/2022 school year.

The armed forces continued to maintain a staff chaplaincy with Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic clergy available to military personnel.

In prisons, where religious services were normally accessible, COVID-19 measures at times resulted in limited or suspended access.

Throughout the first half of the year, different religious groups, mostly evangelical Protestants, protested the government's weekend lockdown measures, which included Sunday church closures to prevent COVID-19 transmission. The Association of Full Gospel and Pentecostal Churches in Suriname, along with other religious organizations, petitioned the National Assembly to have their churches reopened. The organizations said the government was infringing on the religious freedom of their congregants by not allowing them to attend church and by limiting access to religious guidance. Other religious organizations had varying opinions on reopening. Representatives for two larger religious organizations, the Moravian Church and the Suriname Islamic Association, told the press that the health and well-being of congregants was more important than reopening during a wave of COVID-19 cases. The government offered religious organizations access to its digital and social media platforms to enable congregants to worship virtually. In early July, the government lifted weekend lockdowns, but churches were not allowed to open until late July, when a protocol for reopening was reached with religious groups.

The Religious Affairs Department of the Ministry of Home Affairs collaborated with different religious organizations to begin the process of standardizing and formally recognizing religious training programs. Formal recognition would allow the ministry to set stipends for clergy under the government wage system. During the year, the process was managed by individual organizations, and there were no minimum requirements. The standardized training developed with support of religious groups was designed to help the government determine who is clergy and the accuracy of the stipends they received. The ministry said it guaranteed the standardization process would not have an impact on recognition of religious organizations.

In public statements, government officials continued to raise the importance of religious freedom, respect for religious diversity, and their commitment to protecting religious minorities. President Santokhi and other government officials noted the country's religious diversity and the importance of respect for that diversity during public speeches. In a September keynote speech in the Netherlands honoring Anton de Kom, who fought for equity and freedom in Suriname in the 1930's and 1940's, President Santokhi pointed to what he stated was the country's rich cultural and religious diversity and how mutual respect for that diversity resulted in a peaceful and harmonious society. The Ministry of Home Affairs supported the organization of the Inter-Religious Harmony Week in January by promoting and sharing video messages of different religious groups on its social media pages and through government media with the goal of creating understanding and increasing respect for different religions.

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

Members of the IRIS, an organization encompassing two Hindu and two Muslim groups, the Jewish community, and the Roman Catholic Church, continued to meet to discuss interfaith activities, as well as the impact of different government policies on society. IRIS collaborated with nonmember religious organizations, such as the Committee of Christian Churches in Suriname, which comprises the Roman Catholic Church, the Moravian Church, the Lutheran Church, as well as the Protestant Church, on efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance. In March, leaders of the IRIS and the Committee of Christian Churches joined forces to promote vaccinations against the COVID-19 virus.

In October, a virtual session of the Open Campus Lectures Series of the Anton de Kom University of Suriname discussed the different religions in the country's culture, which they described as interwoven. Experts discussed how easily individuals could embrace a religion other than their own for guidance on different issues.

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

Embassy officials continued to highlight U.S. government policy on the importance of protection of religious freedom in meetings with government officials. The embassy posted messages on all religious holidays on Facebook, the country's primary social media platform.

During the year, one local individual participated virtually in an embassy-sponsored exchange program that focused on religious freedom.