

# GUYANA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship, including the right to choose and change one's religion. The constitution mandates the Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC) to promote ethnic and religious harmony, and it includes representatives of the country's main religious traditions, including Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam.

According to the Rastafari Council, representatives of the Rastafarian community continued to state a law criminalizing the possession of 15 grams (.53 ounces) or more of marijuana infringed on their religious practices. A council member said a bill passed in November prescribing restorative justice remedies, such as counseling and community service instead of prison sentences for possession of fewer than 30 grams (1.06 ounces) of cannabis, discriminated against Rastafarians because the law hindered their constitutional right to freely practice their religion. The government began a process to select new members to replace the ERC commissioners, whose terms expired in 2021. ERC staff continued to provide public messaging during religious holidays to underscore the need for tolerance and to promote cohesion. During the year, the government promoted respect for religious diversity, including through public messaging on religious holidays.

Religious leaders said there continued to be a high degree of respect for religious diversity and interreligious cooperation in the country. During the year, the Inter-Religious Organization of Guyana (IROG), whose members include representatives of the Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Rastafarian, and Baha'i faiths, conducted interfaith efforts, including by publishing messages in support of religious tolerance. IROG's constituent religious groups continued to lead and participate in programs promoting interfaith tolerance and religious freedom. Their programs included observing World Interfaith Harmony Week with prayers and reflections and hosting a public interreligious dialogue among youth on the topic "Religious Tolerance: A Tool for a Peaceful Society."

In April, the U.S. Ambassador attended the first government-hosted National Day of Prayer and Fasting. At the event, the Ambassador encouraged the government officials and religious representatives to continue to promote and pursue religious

inclusivity. In October, the Ambassador attended a government-hosted prayer and culture activity in honor of Diwali, a Hindu festival. At the event, the Ambassador took the opportunity to encourage the government officials to continue their efforts to promote respect for religious diversity and inclusivity. In April, the Ambassador hosted an iftar for leaders of the Muslim, Christian, Rastafarian, and Baha'i communities. The religious leaders discussed how promoting religious tolerance could further promote cohesion and inclusivity. U.S. embassy officials met with representatives of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups throughout the year and discussed issues related to religious tolerance. Embassy officials amplified messages of religious tolerance on social media with greetings posted on Christian, Islamic, and Hindu holidays.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 790,000 (midyear 2022). According to the 2012 national census, the most recent, 64 percent of the population identify as Christian, 25 percent Hindu, and 7 percent Muslim (mainly Sunni). Less than 1 percent belong to other religious groups, which include Rastafarians, Baha'is, Afro-descendent Faithists, and Areruya, an Indigenous faith system. An estimated 3 percent of the population do not profess a religious affiliation. Among Christians, Pentecostals comprise 23 percent of the population; Roman Catholics, 7 percent; Anglicans, 5 percent; Seventh-day Adventists, 5 percent; Methodists, 1 percent; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, less than 1 percent, and other Christians, 21 percent, which includes those belonging to the Assembly of God Church, the Church of Christ, and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, among others.

The membership of most religious groups includes a cross section of ethnic groups, although nearly all Hindus are of South Asian descent, and most Rastafarians are of African descent. Most Muslims are of South Asian descent, but there is also a significant Afro-Muslim population.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship, including the right to choose and change one's religion. The constitution protects the right of religious groups to provide religious instructions to their adherents. No citizen is compelled to take part in any religious education, ceremony, or observance of a religion without the individual's consent. The constitution forbids taking an oath contrary to one's religion or belief without the individual's consent. An unenforced law prescribes a prison term of one year for a blasphemous libel conviction; however, the law exempts religious expression made in "good faith and decent language."

The constitution mandates the establishment of the ERC, with the purpose of promoting ethnic harmony, eliminating ethnic discrimination, and encouraging respect for religious diversity. The ERC includes representatives of the country's main religious traditions, including Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam.

There is no official system for formal registration of a religious group, but to receive government recognition, all places of worship must be registered through the Deeds Registry. The Deeds Registry requires an organization to submit a proposed name and address for the place of worship, as well as the names of executive group members or congregation leaders. Once formally recognized, a place of worship falls under legislation governing nonprofit organizations, allowing the organization to conduct financial operations, buy property, and receive tax benefits in its name.

Foreign religious workers require a visa from the Ministry of Home Affairs. Religious groups seeking to enter an Indigenous village for the purpose of proselytizing must apply for and obtain permission from the village council. Application to a village council must include the name of the group, the names of its members who will be going to the village, their purpose, and the estimated date of arrival. Reportedly, however, village councils rarely enforce this requirement.

There is no religious education in public schools, regardless of whether the school is religiously affiliated. Most public schools' religious affiliations are Anglican or Methodist. There are both public and private religiously affiliated schools. Private schools are operated entirely by private groups and are not funded by the

state. All students attending private religious schools must participate in religious education, regardless of a student's religious beliefs.

Children must show proof of vaccination to attend public or private schools. There are no exemptions for religious reasons.

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

### **Government Practices**

General Secretary of the Rastafari Council Ras Khafra said authorities arrested members of the Rastafarian community during the year for possession of 15 grams (.53 ounces) or more of marijuana, and this infringed on their religious practices. In November, the government passed a bill to remove prison time for possession of up to 30 grams (1.06 ounces) of marijuana and to remove the fine for smoking or otherwise using cannabis. The new law replaced the prison sentence for possession of small amounts of marijuana with counseling or community service. The Rastafari Council, however, continued to petition the government to legalize the use of small amounts of marijuana for religious purposes. A council member said he believed the new law discriminated against Rastafarians because it hindered their constitutional right to freely practice their religion.

The government continued to maintain regulations limiting the number of visas for foreign representatives of religious groups based on historical trends, the relative size of the group, and the president's discretion; however, the government and religious groups, whose membership included foreign missionaries, continued to state the government did not apply the visa limitation rule. Religious groups also said the visa quotas the government allotted to them were sufficient and did not adversely affect their activities.

The ERC commissioners' three-year term of office expired in April 2021, and in August, the government began a process to select new members to replace the ERC commissioners, asking religious and civil society organizations for nominees for its consideration. As of year's end, the government did not appoint new commissioners. ERC staff continued to provide public messaging during religious holidays to underscore the need for tolerance and to promote cohesion.

The government continued to promote interfaith harmony and respect for diversity through its public messaging and initiatives that foster social cohesion. On all major Christian, Hindu, and Islamic holidays, President Mohammed Irfaan Ali delivered national messages. During Ramadan, Ali stated, “Qurbani is not simply an act of sacrifice, but one intended [for] us ... to embrace our fellow brothers and sisters.” In his Easter message, Ali stated, “Easter activities [in Guyana] celebrate our oneness. Let us renew ... our commitment to each other,” and in his Diwali message, Ali stated, “May the spirit of Diwali, celebrated with such fervour in our country, help to fuse our people closer together, respecting our ethnic diversity.” In April, during the time of fasting in observance of Ramadan, Lent, and Navaratri (a time of prayer and reflection for nine days for the Hindu community), the government held a National Day of Prayer and fasting to encourage religious fellowship and comradery among Muslims, Christians, and Hindus.

Government representatives continued to meet with leaders of various religious groups with the expressed aim of promoting social cohesion and discussing the tolerance of diversity, including of Muslim, Hindu, and Christian groups. Government officials also participated regularly in the observance of Christian, Hindu, and Islamic religious holidays throughout the year. The government continued to declare some holy days of the country’s three major religious groups, including Eid al-Adha, Holi, Easter, and Diwali, as national holidays.

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

According to religious leaders, there was a high degree of acceptance of and respect for religious diversity. The IROG, whose membership comprises approximately 40 religious bodies and organizations and includes representatives Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Rastafarian, and Baha’i faiths, continued its stated purposed of promoting social cohesion and respecting religious diversity through its programs and initiatives. Their programs included observing World Interfaith Harmony Week with prayers and reflections and hosting a public interreligious dialogue among youth entitled “Religious Tolerance: A Tool for a Peaceful Society.”

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

In April, the U.S. Ambassador attended the first government-hosted National Day of Prayer and Fasting. At the event, the Ambassador encouraged the government officials and religious representatives to continue to promote and pursue religious inclusivity. In October, the Ambassador attended a government-hosted prayer and cultural activity in honor of Diwali, a Hindu festival. The Ambassador took the opportunity to encourage the government officials to continue their efforts to promote respect for religious diversity and inclusivity.

In April, the Ambassador hosted an iftar for leaders of Muslim, Christian, Baha'i, and Rastafarian communities. The religious leaders discussed how their promotion of religious tolerance ensured cohesion and inclusivity. In August, embassy officials organized a roundtable that included representatives of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Baha'i groups, in which they discussed issues related to religious tolerance, fostering cohesion, and respect for religious differences.

Embassy officials attended events hosted by the Christian, Muslim, and Hindu communities, and they amplified messages of respect for religious diversity with regular social media postings. In honor of International Religious Freedom Day, the embassy posted that "freedom of religion or belief is a universal human right. The United States maintains its unwavering support to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief for all."