

TIMOR-LESTE 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship and of religious instruction. There is no official state religion. Religious organizations may register with the government under the regulations provided for nonprofit corporate bodies. Religious minority groups continued to report instances in which civil servants rejected marriage or birth certificates issued by religious organizations other than the Roman Catholic Church. Non-Catholic groups reported tensions regarding unequal allocation of government funds, which they said significantly favored the Catholic Church. Government leaders occasionally consulted with religious leaders as part of the government's broader engagement with civil society.

Representatives from a minority religious group reported that an unknown assailant threw stones at them during a church service in September. They said one stone hit a woman inside the church, injuring her face. At year's end a case remained pending in which, according to Protestant religious leaders in Dili, an unidentified person threw a rock at a Protestant church in the Dili subdistrict of Metinaro in October 2018.

U.S. embassy officials engaged regularly with government officials, including from the Office of the Prime Minister, on religious freedom issues, including discrimination in public service, recognition of religious minority documentation, and budget allocations to minority religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.4 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2015 census, 97.6 percent of the population is Catholic, approximately 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 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 based on religious beliefs and provides for both the right to conscientious objection and freedom to teach any religion. The constitution protects 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. A concordat between the government and the Holy See 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 its foreign missionaries to serve in the country.

Religious organizations which conduct religious services but do not engage in other activities do not need to register with the government and may obtain tax-exempt status from the Ministry of Finance. Religious organizations seeking to open private schools or provide other community services must submit articles of association and other relevant documentation to register as nonprofit corporate bodies through the Ministry of Justice’s National Directorate for Registry and Notary Services (DNRN). The law requires a separate registration with the Ministry of Interior for associations with primarily foreign members, including religious organizations, which must submit their articles of incorporation, proof they have the means to carry out their activities, and the name of a designated representative. To receive a tax identification number, organizations must register first with the Ministry of Justice and then bring that registration to the Service for Registration and Verification of Businesses, the business registration agency. The DNRN then issues a certificate and legally charters the organization.

The Ministry of Education classifies religious study as an elective subject in public schools. Most schools in the country are public, although the Catholic Church also operates private schools.

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. Visa regulations are the same for all foreign religious workers, regardless of religious affiliation.

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

Government Practices

Muslim and Protestant religious minority leaders again reported notaries public rejected marriage and birth certificates from religious organizations other than the Catholic Church as supporting documentation required for registering for schools and other official acts. The leaders stated this occurred on an ad hoc rather than systematic basis, and authorities resolved the incidents by addressing them with the notarial office director. The notary service issued birth certificates to minority religious community members, but not marriage certificates, according to the president of the National Islamic Council. Members of non-Catholic religions, however, had the option to marry in a civil ceremony witnessed by a notary public, according to a Ministry of Justice official. Registrations of births and marriages with the government continued to be available, but civil registration rates remained relatively low in comparison to registration for religious certificates. Protestant and Muslim leaders said they would continue to engage the Offices of the President and Prime Minister to recognize non-Catholic certificates and in March wrote the president of the national parliament to request a meeting to discuss amendments to the civil code to accommodate minority religions. The proposed changes to the civil code relate to specifying recognition for marriage certificates from non-Catholic religions. The national parliament did not respond to the letter by year's end.

The Office of the Prime Minister provided a budget allocation to the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Timor-Leste and transferred \$1.1 million to each of the country's three Catholic dioceses (total \$3.3 million), compared with \$1.5 million to each the previous year. The terms of the concordat with the Holy See governed the allocations. The direct budget allocations to the Catholic Church again caused some tension with non-Catholic religious groups, according to minority religious leaders, who said the funding significantly favored the Catholic Church. Catholics and all other religious groups could apply, along with other organizations, for part of a separate \$3.5 million government fund set aside for civil society organizations during the year. Government officials defended the discrepancy in amounts as representative of the country's religious demographics. According to an official in the Office of the Prime Minister, the fund supported a Protestant orphanage on

Atauro Island, as well as projects from other minority religious groups, Catholic groups, and secular NGOs.

Several Catholic and Islamic holidays were also national holidays. President of the Authority of the Special Administrative Region of Oecusse-Ambeno Mari Alkatiri decreed that Eid al-Fitr would be celebrated in the Oecusse enclave on June 5, rather than June 6, as decreed by the central government. Alkatiri, who is Muslim, called the central government's decree a "crass error," while Minister of State for the Presidency of the Council of Ministers Agio Pereira told press the June 6 date had been set in consultation with the country's religious leaders.

The government occasionally consulted religious leaders as part of broader engagement with civil society. For example, the government consulted religious leaders from multiple denominations as part of a 2019 Voluntary National Review on the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, subsequently presented at the July High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development at the United Nations. On August 29, cabinet ministers attended religious services by five denominations that were part of a larger program to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the referendum in which Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia.

In February the Catholic Church inaugurated three government-funded church buildings in the Bobonaro subdistrict of Maliana.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Leaders of the Catholic Church and longstanding Protestant and Muslim communities reported continued positive cooperation and relationships among religious groups. The president of the National Islamic Council called Timor-Leste the most tolerant country in Asia.

Some minority religious groups reported strong societal pressure to remain in the Catholic Church. Minority religious leaders stated that their members had been assailed by family and community members because of their religious beliefs.

Representatives from a minority religious group told embassy staff that an unknown assailant threw stones at them during a church service in September. They said one stone hit a woman inside the church, injuring her face. At year's end, the group had not reported the incident to police.

At year's end, a case remained pending in which, according to Protestant religious leaders in Dili, an unidentified person threw a rock at a Protestant church in the Dili subdistrict of Metinaro in October 2018. Protestant leaders said a land dispute was the root cause of the conflict and brought the case to the attention of the national police and the Office of the Prosecutor General. In late 2018, the prosecutor's office opened an investigation, and the national police arrested a suspect.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials engaged regularly with government officials, including from the Office of the Prime Minister, on religious issues, such as discrimination in civil service hiring, recognition of religious minority documentation, and budget allocations to different minority groups.

The Ambassador met with a Catholic bishop and Muslim and Protestant community leaders in Dili. A senior embassy officer met with prominent religious leaders during trips outside the capital. Their discussions covered a range of social issues including religious tolerance.