

Institute on Religion and Public Policy Report

Religious Freedom in Guyana

Executive Summary

(1) Guyana, now independent from French rule, has a diverse religious population. Unlike many of their post-colonial peers, Guyana has a strong respect for religious freedom, both legally and in practice. The Constitution calls for freedom of conscience and religion and allows religious beliefs and practices to be respected without interruption. They have been successful with the implementation of these laws; there have been very few instances of religious abuse in recent years.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

(2) The Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights, and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

Demographics

(3) Guyana has great ethnic and religious diversity. The total population is almost 800,000 with about 44 percent recognizing themselves as of East Indian descent (Indo-Guyanese). 30 percent of the population is ethnically African (Afro-Guyanese) and 17 percent are mixed Indian and African. 9 percent of the Guyana's people are Amerindian. Less than 1 percent of the population is of other ethnicities.

(4) The largest religious group in Guyana is Christianity with 57 percent of the population affiliating themselves with a Christian denomination. Of that 57 percent, 17 percent are Pentecostal, 8 percent Roman Catholic, and 7 percent Anglican. Other Christian groups in Guyana include Seventh Day Adventists, Methodists, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

(5) 28 percent of the population is Hindu. Most of them are also ethnically Indo-Guyanese. However, there has been some conversion to Hinduism by the Afro-

Guyanese population. There has been some conversion of the Indo-Guyanese population to Islam and Christianity, but mostly for professional reasons. Muslims account for 7.2 percent of the population. Other religions such as Rastafarianism and Baha'ism make up a combined 4.3 percent of the population. Around 4 percent of the population is not religious.

History of Freedom and Religion in Guyana

(6) Guyana gained its independence from Britain in 1966, but retained the Queen as the head of state until 1970 when all ties were cut. Under British rule, the state religion was Anglicanism. As a result, Christianity provides the dominant values-system of the nation. Christian values also gained dominance because the Afro-Guyanese population (primarily Christian) settled in Guyana before the East Indians. However, overtime Muslim and Hindu values have been incorporated institutionally and culturally and have equal status in the country.

(7) In the 1960's and 70's, the Anglicans and Catholics worked together to maintain the social and political status quo of the country under the umbrella organization, the Guyana Council of Churches. However, the Catholic Church began to criticize many of the acts of the government in the 1970's and encouraged the Anglicans to do so as well. One of the main issues they addressed was governmental control of church and religious schools.

(8) The current relationship between the government and the religious groups is positive. All religious groups must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs if they want establish operations in the country. Groups of all faiths are officially recognized and there is no formal monitoring by the government. The government also observes Christian, Hindu, and Islamic holidays.

(9) The Guyana Defense Force makes an active effort to ensure that its personnel have access to ministers, religious services, and counseling. The most frequent complaint of this practice is often there is only one Christian mass to serve all denominations on a base. There has also been a report of commanders who require their personnel to attend services, which has been found to favor Christians but not give them an advantage.

Legal Status of Religion

(10) The Constitution of Guyana has very inclusive laws for the protection of religious freedom and practice, but they are framed not as freedom of religion laws, but instead as freedom of conscience. Freedom of conscience is outlined in part 2, article 145 and there are six distinct elements of religious freedom. The first element of religious freedom is that every person is allowed to follow their conscience and choose their own religion, as well as change it. This can be done publicly or privately and either as an individual or community.

(11) No religious group can be prevented from providing religious instruction for its faithful. No individual, eighteen years-old and above, can be forced to attend services or receive instruction against their will. Further, no one is required to take an oath against their conscience or religion.

(12) The Constitution also states that no law may supersede these unless it is a matter of public safety/order or to protect another individual from religious intervention. This clause proves that freedom of religion and conscience are not taken lightly and that the right supersedes many other laws.

Specific Instances of Religious Discrimination

(13) There have been very few instances of religious discrimination and in most circumstances the abuse was from a private citizen who was then punished according to the law. The most recent discrimination occurred in September 2009. Forty members of the Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter Day Saints, mostly U.S. citizens, were detained. They were soon released, but shortly after over one hundred missionaries were ordered to leave the country. There has not been any formal indication that the individuals were detained for religious purposes.

(14) In April 2007, a group of villagers lynched a woman who they thought was a vampire-like creature, an Old Higue. An Old Higue is thought to enter someone's home through a keyhole and drink the blood of infants. The root of this myth comes from a tradition myth in the Obean religion, which blends folk music and African rituals. They killed her as a result of their own religious beliefs and not hers, which does not necessarily make this a case of religious discrimination.

(15) In 2005, an American missionary couple was killed. They had been working to translate Bibles into indigenous languages in Guyana for five years. It is unknown whether their religion was a factor in their slaying.

(16) In 2002, a woman killed one of her friends because she believed her friend was possessed by evil spirits. The woman belonged to the Spirit Church, which has a tradition of ritual beating. She was convicted of manslaughter and was given ten years in prison.

U.S. Foreign Policy

(17) The U.S. has a formal diplomatic relationship with Guyana and their ambassador is located in Georgetown. The U.S. seeks to ensure that the democratic institutions in Guyana are robust and stable. They have helped with economic development and growth. The relationship between the U.S. and Guyana vastly improved under former President Hoyte because of his protection on human rights. The relationship has continued to flourish under the leadership of the presidents that followed.

Conclusion

(18) Guyana's comprehensive laws for the protection of religious freedom and conscience should serve as an example to many countries. With its diverse population, it would be easy for religious discrimination to take place, but thus far it has not been the case. In instances of discrimination, the government should continue to prosecute those who commit the crime. Guyana should also work to ensure that the same respect extends to all human rights issues, and not just religious freedom.