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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Belize

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom to express one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. Methodist Bishop Alvin Moses Benguche serves as an appointed senator with a constitutional mandate to represent all religious groups in the National Assembly. The Belize Council of Churches (BCC) and Belize Association of Evangelical Churches (BAEC) serve as part of the government-established People's Constitutional Commission.

In March, the BCC expressed concern about the passage in April of a new law affecting nongovernmental organizations and not for profit organizations, stating it would treat religious organizations as businesses and therefore, hamper religious groups' humanitarian work. In January, the Minister of Public Service, Constitutional and Political Reform, and Religious Affairs, Henry Charles Usher, participated in the Ahmadiyya Muslim community's annual gathering, where he emphasized the importance of unity, understanding, and peace. In December, Minister Usher signed an agreement on behalf of the government with Reverend Benguche, representing Christian groups, affirming the partnership between government and Christian groups and upholding their shared values of religious freedom and

freedom of conscience. Representatives of other religions were consulted but did not participate in the agreement.

According to the father of a child who in 2022 was not allowed to enroll in either an evangelical Protestant or a Seventh-day Adventist primary school because of his dreadlocks, the father's only alternative was to enroll his child in a nondenominational school during the year. The father said he and his family were practicing Rastafarians and his son's dreadlocks were consistent with their religious beliefs. According to Ahmadiyya Muslim community members, they continued to enjoy societal acceptance, but not from members of other Muslim communities, who did not recognize the Ahmadiyya Muslim community.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials reiterated the importance of religious tolerance in discussions with government officials, including the Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and opposition leader, and they encouraged the government to engage with a wide spectrum of religious groups. The embassy used social media to highlight the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity.

Section I.

Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the population at 410,000 (midyear 2023). According to the most recent census from 2010, Roman Catholics are the largest religious group, accounting for 40 percent of the population. Protestants make up 32 percent, including Pentecostals (8 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (5 percent), Anglicans (5 percent), Mennonites (4 percent), Baptists (4 percent), Methodists (3 percent), the Church of the Nazarene (3 percent), and the Salvation Army. Additionally, a small number of Presbyterians and Chinese Christian Mission adherents reside in the country. There are also approximately 5,500 members of the Church of Christ. Jehovah's Witnesses make up 2 percent of the population, while other religious groups, including members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Rastafarians, Baha'is, and Soka Gakkai, along with followers of Indigenous religions, together constitute 11 percent. Approximately 15 percent of the population does not affiliate with one of these religious organizations.

No religious group is a majority in any of the country's six districts. Catholics reside throughout the country. Mennonites and Pentecostals reside mostly in the rural areas of the Cayo, Stann Creek, and Orange Walk Districts.

The 2010 census lists 577 Sunni and Shia Muslims in the country. This statistic does not include the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at group, which, according to its leaders, numbers approximately 200. The Jewish community numbers fewer than 50 members. Some members of Indigenous groups, including the Maya and the Garifuna, practice traditional folk religious rituals.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The preamble to the constitution acknowledges "the supremacy of God." The constitution provides for freedom of religion, freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom to express one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. It also provides for freedom, either alone or in community with others, to manifest and propagate one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. It states that no one may be compelled to take an oath contrary to one's religion or belief. The constitution also stipulates religious groups may establish places of education and states that "no such community shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for persons of that community." A rarely enforced law limits speech that is deemed "blasphemous or indecent."

By law, the BCC and the BAEC alternate in the appointment of the senator with the governor general's concurrence. The BCC includes the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches, as well as the Salvation Army, the Chinese Christian Mission, Seventh-day Adventists, and the Young Women's Christian Association. The BAEC includes evangelical Protestant groups, the Church of Christ, and the Assembly of God Church but excludes the NEAB.

By law, the senator provides advice on public policy affecting the political positions of religious groups. This senatorial seat places the political interests of religious leaders on par with three other senators, who are appointed to represent labor unions, the business community, and the NGO community. Methodist Bishop Benguche currently serves as the appointed senator with a constitutional mandate to represent all religious groups in the National Assembly. The BCC and the BAEC serve as part of the government-established People's Constitutional Commission.

The law requires all religious groups to register with the official Companies Registry in the Ministry of the Attorney General in the same way a business would register. Registration allows a religious organization to operate legally in the country; receive state recognition; negotiate, sue, and be sued; own property; hire employees; and lend or borrow money. There is a one-time registration fee of 295 Belize dollars (\$150) and a yearly fee of five Belize dollars (\$3). Requirements for registration include a memorandum of association with the government delineating the group's objective and mission, an article of association, and a letter from the Central Bank if the organization has foreign financial contributors. The government may shut down the facilities of groups that do not register.

The government does not levy property taxes on churches or other places of worship. Other religious group owned buildings occupied on a regular basis, such as clergy residences, are not tax-exempt. Religious organizations may also partner with the state to operate schools, hospitals, and other charitable organizations and, depending on funding availability, receive financial assistance from the government in support of these activities. Churches may apply for NGO status, which makes them exempt from paying income tax, business tax, and any other government-levied tax or duty. Churches are not entitled to government-provided cash subventions (grants).

The public school curriculum requires all schools to conduct weekly nondenominational "spirituality" classes incorporating morals and values. Government-supported, religious group run schools may teach lessons on world religions for students from kindergarten through high school as part of social studies curricula. These religious group run schools also offer separate religious education classes that are specific to their own faith, in addition to required courses. While there is no official rule governing a student's ability to opt out of either of these classes, parents may decide their children will not attend. The constitution prohibits any educational institution from obligating a child to attend any religious ceremony or observance.

Due to insufficient government funds and preindependence agreements, Churches comanage with the government approximately 60 percent of primary schools, 40 percent of high schools, and 50 percent of colleges. Religious groups that comanage educational institutions include the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist, Nazarene, Salvation Army, evangelical Protestant, Presbyterian, Muslim, Pentecostal, and Mennonite communities. Schools routinely observe Christian and other religious holidays at the schools' discretion. Non-Christian religious groups operate a few schools, such as the Muslim Community Primary School in Belize City. Almost all schools, public and private, must incorporate the national education curriculum and adhere to government regulations under the monitoring of the

Ministry of Education. Some Mennonite communities run primary schools in their villages, which are independent of Ministry of Education oversight and based on Mennonite religious teachings. Only some of these schools align with the national education curriculum for mathematics, science, and social studies.

The law grants respect for prison inmates' religious beliefs, and inmates may participate in religious activities in the country's sole prison. Religious leaders may request use of the chapel inside the facility and offer religious services to inmates. The law prohibits requiring unnecessary work by prisoners on Sunday and other major Christian holidays (Christmas and Good Friday) and by prisoners recorded as belonging to other religions on their recognized days of religious observance. The law allows the provision of religious scriptures and other books of religious observance to prisoners.

To enter the country and proselytize, foreign religious workers require a multiple-entry visa that costs 100 Belize dollars (\$50) and is valid for one year. Applicants must also purchase a religious worker's permit that costs 50 Belize dollars (\$25) and is renewable annually. Visa applications request information on an applicant's intended length of stay, location of service, availability of funding for their activity, and specific purpose. Members of all religious groups are eligible to obtain visas. While a group does not need to be locally registered, a recommendation by a locally registered religious group lends more credibility to the visa request, according to local authorities.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

In March, the BCC expressed concern about the passage in April of the Nongovernmental Organization – Not for Profit Organizations (NGO-NPO) Law established as part of the government's compliance with international anti-money laundering standards and to combat terrorism financing. The BCC emphasized stated the new law would treat religious organizations as businesses and hamper religious groups' humanitarian work. In April, after consultations among the government, churches, and NGOs, the government passed the legislation; however, it did not grant accommodations for NGOs or religious organizations.

BCC executive representatives said the BCC had reservations regarding a proposed equal opportunity bill, which would make discrimination a crime. Notwithstanding their reservations, including over expanding the definition of gender to recognize same-sex partners and of what constitutes a family, they said they were inclined to partner with the

government to protect disenfranchised communities, including women, migrants, victims of violence, and persons with disabilities. As of year's end, the bill had not been referred to parliament for consideration.

BCC representatives expressed member churches' concern for the government-imposed state of emergency meant to curb gang-related crime, stating, "It's not the solution." Instead, the BCC proposed a government-private sector partnership, which would include churches, to find solutions to address the root causes of crime, especially in gang-ridden areas. Senator Benguche continued to call for more fiscal oversight of public funds. He said, "In the spirit of democracy and good governance, the government should be accountable to its citizens and social partners." The government did not respond to this proposal by year's end.

In September, media outlets reported the BCC was concerned about the government organizing a national day parade on a Sunday, the traditional day of worship for most Christians in the country. Senator Benguche stated the government planned the celebratory event without consulting the churches. In an official statement, Minister Usher endorsed a National Ecumenical Service underscoring it as "a significant event on Belize's religious calendar, which brings together people of diverse faiths and backgrounds to celebrate unity, peace, and shared values."

According to the BCC, during the year, the management of religious group run public schools implemented and supported poverty assistance programs through parent teacher associations (PTAs). The BCC said that only a few schools participated and asked the Ministry of Education to support the formation of additional PTAs in schools that needed them.

During the year, BCC representatives expressed concern about what they said was the government's limited support for irregular migrants in the provision of services that include health services, a food-pantry program, and accommodations for employment. The BCC commended, however, the government's amnesty program, which offered a path for thousands of irregular migrants to regularize their status in the country and thus qualify for overall government services and allowed them a pathway to naturalization.

According to prison officials, authorities allowed inmates to communicate with religious officiants by mail and to receive counselling from spiritual leaders, including from the Ahmadiyya Muslim community.

The Belize Defense Force (BDF) continued to retain a nondenominational chaplain and allocated space in the country's military facilities for religious observance. With prior BDF

consent, any religious group could use the space for worship.

In January, Minister of Public Service, Constitutional and Political Reform, and Religious Affairs Usher participated in the Ahmadiyya Muslim community's annual gathering in Belize City. Speaking at the event, Usher stated the event "is important at a time when there is so much division and conflict in the world," and he emphasized the importance of unity, understanding, and peace.

In April, Senator Benguche underscored the "liberties enjoyed in Belize to practice one's faith and live in harmony among others of differing religious views."

On December 20, Minister of Public Service, Constitutional and Political Affairs, and Religious Affairs Usher signed an agreement on behalf of the government with Reverend Benguche in representation of Christian groups. According to the government, representatives of the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Rastafarian communities were consulted regarding the agreement, but did not participate. The agreement, the first of its kind, affirms the partnership between government and Christian groups and upholds the shared values of human rights, including religious freedom and freedom of conscience. The signers of the agreement promised to ensure the country would never become "a theocracy or an atheist humanist society" and would recognize the "supremacy of God" as enshrined in the constitution.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to Kevin Pollard, the father of a five-year-old child whom in 2022 school authorities did not allow to enroll in either an evangelical Protestant or a Seventh-day Adventist primary school because of his dreadlocks, he had to enroll his child in a nondenominational school during the year. Pollard said he and his family were practicing Rastafarians and his son's dreadlocks were consistent with their religious beliefs.

The interfaith Belize Chaplain Service, which includes representatives from the Methodist, Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Pentecostal Churches, the Salvation Army, the Chinese Christian Mission, and Muslim and Baha'i faith leaders, continued to conduct visits to hospitals, children's homes, and homeless shelters.

According to the Belize Broadcasting Authority, 15 registered religious-based radio stations operated in the country. The Belize Broadcasting Authority said evangelical Protestant groups

continued to own and operate most of the stations. Other stations were run by Catholic, Mennonite, and Pentecostal groups.

The Catholic Church-inspired Kolbe Foundation continued to manage the Belize Central Prison, the country's only prison, with a focus on rehabilitating inmates. It provided support for all religious denominations within the inmate population, subject to the availability of a suitable chaplain. According to the BCC, the foundation continued to respect dietary restrictions for prisoners of diverse religious backgrounds.

According to Ahmadiyya Muslims, they continued to enjoy societal acceptance, but not from members of other Muslim communities, who did not recognize the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. They also stated that private companies continued to be reluctant to grant leave or accommodations for Friday prayers.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials continued to reiterate the importance of religious tolerance in meetings with government officials, including the Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and opposition leader, and encouraged the government to engage with a wide spectrum of religious groups. In April, the Ambassador met with executive representatives of the BCC to discuss their view on religious freedom and their efforts to address poverty, crime, and education. Embassy officials also engaged with representatives of the Muslim community to discuss religious freedom in the country.

The embassy used social media, including Facebook and Twitter, to highlight the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity. Messages underscored the importance of protecting and advancing the fundamental right of religious freedom, including the freedom to worship safely in the country.

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