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# 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Panama

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Panama's constitution, laws, and executive decrees provide for freedom of religion and worship, and they also prohibit discrimination based on religion. The constitution recognizes Catholicism as the religion of the majority of citizens and requires Catholic instruction in public schools, with exemptions allowed.

The government adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism in July. In a tweet, Organization of American States Commissioner for Antisemitism Fernando Lottenberg noted Panama's adoption of the definition, calling it a milestone in the fight against racism and discrimination. Jewish leaders praised the decision; one stated it was vital in fighting antisemitism.

The Yitzhak Rabin private school hosted an interfaith dialogue in June with the Interreligious Institute of Panama (the Institute). To celebrate the founding of Panama City, members of the Institute provided guided tours in August of their houses of worship and educational briefings on the tenets of their faiths.

The U.S. embassy engaged with local stakeholders on issues of religious freedom throughout the year. The Ambassador spoke at a Yom HaShoah event in April to honor victims of t

Holocaust. She visited the Baha'i temple in August, where she emphasized the importance of religious minorities being able to practice their faith freely and safely. The Ambassador also hosted an interfaith roundtable in August, in which the participants stressed their commitment to religious freedom and interfaith dialogue.

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## Section I.

### Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.4 million (midyear 2023). In a 2022 Panama National Institute of Statistics and Census survey, 65 percent of respondents identified as Catholic; 22 percent as evangelical; 6 percent as having no religion; and 4 percent as "other religion." Jewish leaders estimate their community at 15,000 members, centered largely in Panama City. A Shia Muslim leader estimated the Muslim community (Shia and Sunni) amounts to 14,000, with most Muslims located in Panama City, Colon, and Penonome. The leader said fewer Muslims live in David and Santiago in the western part of the country. Shia Muslims are primarily of Lebanese origin, and Sunni Muslims are primarily of other Arab and Pakistani origin.

Other groups making up less than 5 percent of the population include (in descending order of membership) Episcopalians, Baha'is, Buddhists, Methodists, Lutherans, and Rastafarians; other small religious groups, found primarily in Panama City and other large urban areas, include Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Pentecostals, Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches, the Church of Scientology, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Local religious leaders estimated only a few individuals are Babalaos, who follow the Yoruba religious tradition and are associated with Cuba's Santeria religion.

Indigenous communities are home to numerous Indigenous religions, including Ibeorgun (prevalent among Guna Panamanians), Mama Tata and Mama Chi (prevalent among Ngabe-Bugle Panamanians), and Embera (prevalent among the Embera Panamanians). Adherents of these religions live across the country, which complicates efforts to estimate their numbers. Indigenous representatives estimate the practitioners of Mama Tata and Mama Chi number in the tens of thousands, whereas the practitioners of Ibeorgun and Embera likely number in the thousands.

## Section II.

# Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### **LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

The constitution, laws, and executive decrees prohibit discrimination based on religious practices, and they provide for freedom of religion and worship so long as “Christian morality and public order” are respected. The constitution recognizes Catholicism – which the government interprets as Roman Catholicism, specifically – as the religion of the majority of citizens but does not designate it as the state religion. Clergy and members of religious orders may only hold public offices related to social assistance, education, and scientific research. The constitution forbids religion-based political parties.

The constitution grants legal status to religious groups, which permits them to manage and administer their property within legal limits. If groups decline to register, they may not apply for grants or subsidies. To register, a group must submit to the Ministry of Government a power of attorney, charter, names of its board members (if applicable), a copy of the internal bylaws (if applicable), and a four-balboa (\$4) processing fee. Once the Ministry of Government approves the registration, the religious association must record the ministry’s resolution in the Public Registry. Registered religious associations must apply to the Directorate of Internal Revenue of the Ministry of Economy and Finance to receive clearance for duty-free imports. If the National Assembly and cabinet approve, the government may allot publicly owned properties to registered religious associations. Under the law, no taxes apply to income derived from religious activities such as church or burial services, or charitable events.

Registered religious groups include the Roman Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox Church, Episcopal Church, Methodist Church, Evangelical Methodist Church, the Baha’i Faith, Soka Gakkai International (Buddhist), Church of Jesus Christ, Muslim Congregation of Colon, Muslim Congregation of Panama City, Muslim Congregation of Cocle Province, Muslim Congregation of Chiriqui Province, Jewish Kol Shearith Israel Congregation, Jewish Shevet Ahim Congregation, Jewish Beth El Congregation, Baptist Church, Hossana Evangelical Church, Casa de Oracion (house of prayer) Cristiana Evangelical Church, Pentecostal Church, Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church, Crossroads Christian Church, Ministry of the Family Christian Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Church of Scientology, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Babalaos. Rastafarians, which have a small congregation scattered across three provinces that does not own property, have not applied to register.

By law, Indigenous tribes control their own autonomous lands within the country, which are called *comarcas* (territorial divisions similar to U.S. Native American tribal nations). According to the law, tribal autonomy permits individuals to practice religion and maintain cultural traditions without state interference.

The Office of the Ombudsman mediates disputes, but its formal recommendations are not binding. The office may act only if it receives a formal complaint, or if the media publishes a complaint.

The constitution requires public schools to provide instruction on Roman Catholic teachings. Parents may exempt their children from religious education. The constitution also allows the establishment of private religious schools. Private religious schools may not refuse to enroll a student for not being a member of the religious group sponsoring the school.

Immigration law grants foreign religious workers temporary missionary worker visas that they must renew every two years, for up to a total of six years. The two-year renewal requirement does not apply to Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian priests and nuns, who receive six-year renewable visas, and which only require them to “respect Christian morality.” Clergy of other religious groups, as well as other religious workers, may also apply for the special six-year visa. However, these workers must submit additional documents. These additional documents include a copy of their organization’s bylaws, a Ministry of Government-issued registration certificate, and a letter from the organization’s leader in the country, which certifies the religious worker will be employed at its place of worship. Applicants from all religious denominations must pay a 250-balboas (\$250) fee.

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

## **GOVERNMENT PRACTICES**

The government adopted the IHRA’s working definition of antisemitism in July. Foreign Minister Janaina Tewaney led a ceremony at the ministry on July 25, where she delivered the resolution adopting the definition. Fernando Lottenberg, Commissioner for Antisemitism at the Organization of American States, noted Panama was the seventh nation in the Americas to adopt the definition and said the decision was a milestone in the fight against racism and discrimination. Minister of the Presidency Jose Simpson, other officials, the Ambassador of Israel, and members of the country’s Jewish community attended the ceremony. In an interview with Jewish News Syndicate, Daniel S. Mariaschin, CEO of B’nai B’rith International

said, "Panama's adopting the IHRA definition is yet another important endorsement for these vital standards used in the fight against antisemitism."

Members of non-Roman Catholic religious groups continued to state the laws forbidding religious discrimination were ambiguous, because the constitution designated Catholicism as the sole religion taught in public schools. Non-Roman Catholic groups said this could be construed as discriminatory, though these groups did not lodge complaints about the issue during the year.

The Institute is an interfaith committee comprised of religious leaders from many religious groups. Representatives include those who are Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, and from other Protestant denominations, as well as from the Colon Islamic Congregation, Baha'i Faith, Kol Shearith Jewish Congregation, Buddhist Soka Gakkai Congregation, and Hindu faith. These representatives, through the Institute, said government officials did not often solicit their opinions on decisions related to general issues of religious freedom and practice. Government representatives did, however, seek Institute members' ceremonial participation in public events. According to one of its members, the Institute continued to support the creation of a government-level secretariat for religious affairs but decided to wait until after the May 2024 national elections to raise the issue again. The government continued to invite primarily Roman Catholic clergy to offer religious invocations at public events.

President Laurentino Cortizo invited representatives of three of the country's Jewish congregations to his office on September 21 to celebrate Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. President Cortizo, Vice President Jose Gabriel Carrizo, and other senior officials visited several of the synagogues to wish Jewish worshippers a happy new year.

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### Section III.

## Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Institute continued to meet several times during the year. The Institute's stated goal was to serve as a coordination mechanism for interfaith activities and to promote mutual respect and appreciation among religious groups. For example, the Yitzhak Rabin private school, which has students from other religious communities as well as Jewish students, hosted an interfaith dialogue in June with Christian, Muslim, and Jewish clergy from the Institute. To celebrate Panama City's founding, members of the Institute opened their houses of worship in August to the general public for the first time and provided guided tours and educational

briefings on their faiths. Fifteen Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Bah'ai, Buddhist, Hindu, and Hare Krishna groups participated. Throughout the year, Institute members celebrated key holidays, including Christmas, Rosh Hashanah, Passover, and Ramadan and publicly congratulated others on their religious festivities.

Press and social media reported in April on the government of Nicaragua's expulsion of Panamanian Roman Catholic priest Donaciano Alarcon Valdes. The Archdiocese of Panama said the government expelled Alarcon for organizing a Holy Week procession in front of his church. The government of Nicaragua had banned such processions. Alarcon told media outlets the procession did not happen and that he was expelled, rather, because of the "tense situation" in Nicaragua. Roman Catholic media said Alarcon's "crime" was praying during Mass for the release of detained Nicaraguan Bishop Rolando Alvarez. Panamanian Archbishop Jose Ulloa called the expulsion "absurd." He urged Roman Catholics in Panama to continue praying for their sister country.

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#### Section IV.

## U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Throughout the year, embassy officials engaged with local stakeholders on issues related to religious freedom, including individual leaders of the Baha'i, Muslim, and Jewish communities.

The Ambassador spoke in April at a Yom HaShoah event honoring the victims of the Holocaust. Her remarks emphasized the United States commitment to upholding religious freedom and fighting religious discrimination globally. She committed to upholding religious freedom and human rights and urged attendees to do the same, saying "when we recognize the fundamental human dignity of all people, we help build a more just and peaceful world."

In August, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith roundtable in which leaders from different religious groups shared their views about religious issues and their status in the country in general. Episcopal, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, other Protestant, and Jewish leaders attended the event. The Ambassador and the participants stressed their "unwavering" support for religious freedom and dialogue between different faith groups. Also in August, the Ambassador visited the Baha'i Temple, where she noted how important it was for religious minorities to practice their beliefs freely and safely, citing the country's example.

The Ambassador met throughout the year with the Holy See's Apostolic Nuncio. The two discussed the United States' and the Roman Catholic Church's shared commitment to religious freedom and tolerance.

The embassy used social media channels to commemorate major holidays of various religions and to recognize International Religious Freedom Day in October.

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