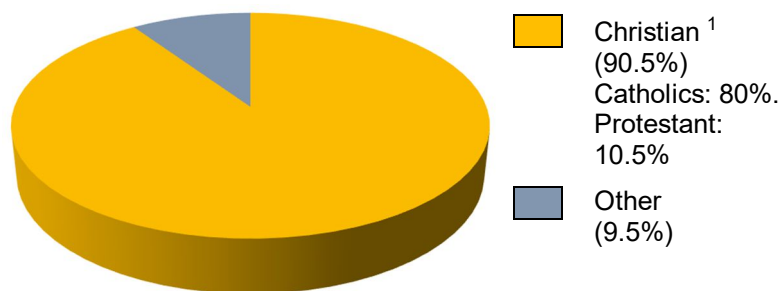


PANAMA



Area: 75,517 km ²	Population²: 3.6 million	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): Spanish
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Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Republic of Panama has a democratically elected unitary government. The preamble of its constitution invokes God's protection, though it does not allow any exemptions, privileges or discrimination based on race, birth, disability, social class, sex, religion or political ideas. The Catholic religion is recognised as the religion of the majority of Panamanians, but everyone is free to profess a religion and faith without any restrictions other than respect for Christian morality and public order. Religious organisations have legal capacity and can administer their own assets. Religious ministers may only hold public offices that relate to social welfare, education and scientific research.

The state recognises and respects the ethnic identity of indigenous communities and fosters the development of their social and spiritual values.

Both public and private schools are open to all students, regardless of race, political affiliation or religion. The curriculum in Panama's state schools is shaped by Roman Catholicism; however, parents or guardians may request that their children be exempt from religious education courses and acts of worship.³

Incidents

The 2014 International Religious Freedom Report for Panama by the U.S. Embassy noted that Muslim leaders complain that Muslim women wearing hijabs are sometimes asked to remove them when taking photos for official documents. However, when women remind them that the measure affects their freedom of religion, they are allowed to keep their heads covered with the face and ears visible. Rastafarians face the same issue with regards to their tam hats as they are asked to remove them at airport checks and when they apply for identity papers.⁴

According to the same report, a Rastafarian leader said that the government did not view Rastafarians as a religious organisation as the group did not own a site to congregate and its members meet in private places for their annual Nyabinghi celebration.⁵ The Ministry of Government has, however, recognised the Rastafarians as an NGO, and has issued official documentation to this effect.

Prospects for freedom of religion

Research did not reveal any incidents of intolerance, discrimination or persecution with respect to freedom of religion in the period covered by this report. This was the case except for some aspects of specific religions (i.e. hijab or tam hats), and these issues have been settled peacefully and without controversy.

¹ http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_174_1.asp accessed on 16 March 2016.

² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19888936> accessed on 7 May 2016.

³ http://www.unesco.org/culture/natlaws/media/pdf/panama/pan_constpol_04_spaorof accessed on 16 March 2016.

⁴ <http://spanish.panama.usembassy.gov/reports-libertad2014.html> accessed on 16 March 2016.

⁵ <http://spanish.panama.usembassy.gov/reports-libertad2014.html> accessed on 16 March 2016.