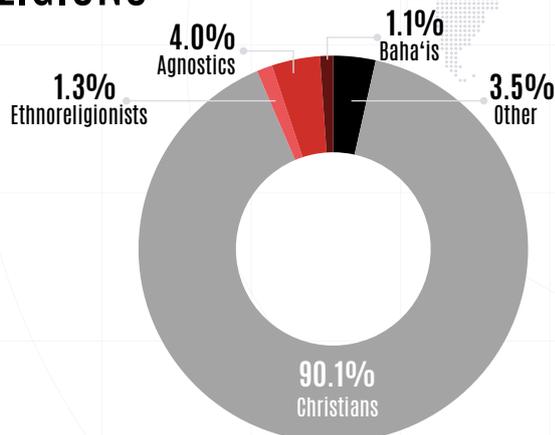




# PANAMA

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The protection of God is invoked in the Preamble of the constitution.<sup>1</sup> Under Article 35, “All religions may be professed and all forms of worship practiced freely, without any other limitation than respect for Christian morality and public order. It is recognised that the Catholic religion is practiced by the majority of Panamanians.”

The constitution stipulates that “there shall be no public or private privileges, or discrimination, by reason of race, birth, social class, handicap, sex, religion or political ideology” (Article 19).

Notwithstanding the duties inherent to their mission, ministers of religion “may hold public posts only when such positions are related to social welfare, public education, or scientific research” (Article 45). It is illegal to establish political parties based on religion (Article 139).

Before taking office, the president and vice president take the oath of office with the words set out in Article

181: “I swear to God and to the country to comply faithfully with the Constitution and the laws of the Republic.” However, Article 181 states that citizens who do not profess religious beliefs can dispense with the invocation of God in the oath.

According to Article 36, “Religious organizations have juridical capacity and manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law, the same as other juridical persons.”

According to Article 94, both public and private schools “are open to all students without distinction of race, social position, political ideology, [or] religion.”

Under Article 107 of the constitution, “The Catholic religion shall be taught in public schools.” However, “students shall not be obliged to attend religion classes, nor to participate in religious services” if their parents or guardians do not wish it.

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

In June 2018, the Interreligious Day of Prayer was held to bear witness to peaceful coexistence and pray for World Youth Day (WYD) 2019.<sup>2</sup>

In August 2018, the Jehovah's Witnesses held their regional assembly.<sup>3</sup>

The country prepared for WYD 2019, the first to be held in Central America. In September 2018, the Ministry of Security arranged for participants to enter the country.<sup>4</sup> In October 2018, the Public Services Authority granted temporary permits to telephone companies to meet increased demand for WYD.<sup>5</sup>

23rd - 27th January 2019, Pope Francis presided over the 15th international World Youth Day. The pope was received by the Panamanian President Varela. At the vigil, the Pope prayed with about 600,000 young people in Campo San Juan Pablo II<sup>6</sup> and approximately 700,000 pilgrims were present at the Campo San Juan Pablo II Metro Park for the final Mass.<sup>7</sup> Present at this Mass were the presidents of Panama, Juan Carlos Varela; of Costa Rica, Carlos Alvarado; of Colombia, Iván Duque; of Guatemala, Jimmy Morales; of El Salvador, Salvador Sánchez Cerén; and Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernández.<sup>8</sup>

In May 2019, the council charged with reforming the constitution ruled out the removal of the reference to "Christian morality" in Article 35.<sup>9</sup>

In May 2019, the Panamanian president honoured two Catholic bishops "for their valuable service to the country and for their contributions to the Nation in the social, religious and humanitarian fields".<sup>10</sup>

In May 2019, Panama's National Assembly approved funding for the Catholic Church, planned by the government of Juan Carlos Varela, a month and a half before he left office. Questions had been raised about the economic support his government had provided to the Catholic Church.<sup>11</sup>

In July 2019, a Member of the National Assembly proposed adding a religious invocation at the opening of the plenary session of the National Assembly.<sup>12</sup>

Following tradition, the faithful took part in the thanksgiving pilgrimage to the Black Christ in October 2019, which also occurs during Holy Week.<sup>13</sup>

Some sects have been involved in a number of incidents. In December 2019, members of the Carbon Nation sect were expelled as a threat to national security.<sup>14</sup> In January 2020, police discovered a mass grave containing the remains of members of the New Light of God sect in the Ngäbe-Buglé district. In September po-

lice arrested the leader and members of the same sect accused of mistreatment, disappearances and the killing of six people in a community, allegedly as a result of violent exorcisms involving beatings and torture.<sup>15</sup>

In January 2020, a youth leader complained that local authorities had no records of the religious groups and sects present in the area.<sup>16</sup>

In August 2020, the Ministry of Health and various religious groups agreed to work together in the fight against COVID-19.<sup>17</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

In the period examined, no episodes of religious intolerance or discrimination were reported. The government has a good relationship with religious organisations and appreciates their work. The number of incidents involving sects has declined. In general, the situation has not changed with respect to religious freedom and the prospects for the future are positive.

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