

# Panama



Stable / Unchanged ▬

## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Christians : **90.3%**
- Agnostics : **3.8%**
- Others : **3.4%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **1.3%**
- Baha'is : **1.2%**

3.990.000

75.320 Km<sup>2</sup>

## 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 practised freely, without any other limitation than respect for Christian morality and public order. It is recognised that the Catholic religion is practised by the majority of Panamanians.” The constitution stipulates in article 19 that “there shall be no public or private privileges, or discrimination, by reason of race, birth, social class, handicap, sex, religion or political ideology”.

Aside from the performance of duties inherent to their missions, article 45 states that ministers of religion “may hold public posts only when such positions are related to social welfare, public education, or scientific research.” Article 139 states that it is illegal to establish political parties based on religion. Before taking office, the President and Vice President of the republic 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 belief can dispense with the invocation of God in the oath. Religious organisations have, according to article 36, “juridical capacity and manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law, the same as other juridical individuals”.

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, at the request of their parents or guardians, this article goes on to state that “students shall not be obliged to attend religion classes, nor to participate in religious services”.

## Incidents

In September 2016 an inter-faith meeting was held on the second World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation convened by Pope Francis, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Panama, the Ecumenical Committee of Panama and an organisation called the Interreligious Dialogue of Panama.<sup>[2]</sup>

In February 2017 the mother of a Rastafarian child filed a case claiming religious discrimination against her son's school. The school told her that its rules require pupils to wear uniforms and their hair without plaits. She alleged that her son's hairstyle was a matter of religious practice. After a meeting between the boy's mother, Rastafarian community representatives and the school administration, an agreement was reached enabling the child to attend the school without further problems.<sup>[3]</sup>

In April 2017 during Holy Week, the Mayor of Panama prohibited the sale of alcoholic beverages on Good Friday. He also banned the use of musical equipment and dances. The measure was meant "to guarantee respect for the religious principles of citizens".<sup>[4]</sup>

In May 2017, there was a controversy after the creation of a new political party allegedly based on Evangelical Christianity. It was claimed that the party's creation flouted the constitution, which makes it illegal to establish political parties based on religion. The leader of the proposed party denied that it was religiously oriented. He pointed out that its provisional statutes and related documentation did not contain any references to religious beliefs!<sup>[5]</sup>

Since 2016 a wave of violence has hit the province of Colón, with multiple deaths. In March 2018, before the government accepted a mediation effort by the Catholic Church and the Colón-based social movement of Columbus, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Panama issued a call for peace and reconciliation and urged the parties to maintain a climate of respect and tolerance so that dialogue could get underway.<sup>[6]</sup>

In February 2018 the Organising Committee of the World Youth Day and the National Association for the Conservation of Nature signed a memorandum of understanding to ensure that environmental care would be part of the planning and organisation of the event. The goal is to minimise its impact on the environment. Panama will host the next World Youth Day in January 2019.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Prospects for freedom of religion

In the period under review, there were no significant departures from the principles of religious freedom guaranteed by the constitution. Compared to the previous period, the state of freedom of religion improved and future prospects seem good.

## Endnotes / Sources

[1] Panama's Constitution of 1972 with Amendments through 2004, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org), [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Panama\\_2004.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Panama_2004.pdf?lang=en), (accessed 12th May 2018).

[2] 'Diálogo interreligioso se celebra mañana', La Estrella de Panamá, 31st August 2016, <http://laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/dialogo-interreligioso-celebra-manana/23958853>, (accessed 23rd April 2018).

[3] D. Cortez, 'Le niegan matrícula porque es rastafari', *Crítica*, 11th February 2017, <https://www.critica.com.pa/provincias/le-niegan-matricula-porque-es-rastafari-464309>, (accessed 10th March 2018); 'Comunidad rastafari denuncia violación de derechos humanos', *Telemetro*, 16th February 2017, [http://www.telemetro.com/nacionales/Comunidad-violacion-articulos-Constitucion-discriminacion\\_0\\_1000100447.html](http://www.telemetro.com/nacionales/Comunidad-violacion-articulos-Constitucion-discriminacion_0_1000100447.html),

(accessed 23rd April 2018).

[4] Y. Núñez, 'Alcaldía de Panamá aplicará 'ley seca' durante 24 horas', La Estrella de Panamá, 13th April 2017, <http://laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/alcaldia-panama-emite-decreto-motivo-semana-santa/23995941>, (accessed 11th March 2018).

[5] C. Anel Cordero, "'Pais' no es partido de evangélicos, Álvarez', La Estrella de Panamá, 8th May 2017, <http://laestrella.com.pa/panama/politica/pais-partido-evangelicos-alvarez/24000331>, (accessed 23rd April 2018).

[6] Comité Permanente de la Conferencia Episcopal Panameña, 'El diálogo, la consulta y los consensos son necesarios para soluciones en Colón', 16th March 2018, <http://iglesia.org.pa/2018/March/comunicado-de-la-cep/>, (accessed 29th March 2018); J. Quiroz, 'Varela anuncia el envío de 200 policías más para custodiar Colón', tvnNOTICIAS, 9th May 2017, [https://www.tvn-2.com/nacionales/Envian-nuevas-unidades-custodiar-Colon\\_0\\_4753024709.html](https://www.tvn-2.com/nacionales/Envian-nuevas-unidades-custodiar-Colon_0_4753024709.html), (accessed 29th March 2018); R. Aponte, 'Hechos delictivos e inseguridad no dan tregua en la provincia de Colón', tvnNOTICIAS, 17th March 2018, [https://www.tvn-2.com/nacionales/Hechos-delictivos-inseguridad-provincia-Colon\\_0\\_4987001325.html](https://www.tvn-2.com/nacionales/Hechos-delictivos-inseguridad-provincia-Colon_0_4987001325.html), (accessed 29th March 2018).

[7] 'El comité organizador local de la JMJ y ANCON firman convenio', Arquidiócesis de Panamá, 22nd February 2018, <http://www.arquidiocesisdepanama.org/2018/02/22/comite-organizador-local-la-jmj-ancon-firman-convenio/>, (accessed 29th March 2018).