

# **DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and belief. A concordat with the Holy See designates Catholicism as the official religion and extends special privileges to the Catholic Church not granted to other religious groups. Non-Catholic religious groups must register as nongovernmental organizations with the Ministry of Finance and the Directorate General of Customs. These groups stated they were treated less advantageously with regard to customs duties and visas.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officials maintained ties with religious representatives and faith groups, meeting with leaders from the Catholic Church, the United Dominican Council for Evangelicals, which represents the Protestant community, officials from the Jewish community, including the one Hasidic rabbi in the country, and leaders from the Muslim community, to discuss religious freedom and tolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.5 million (July 2015 estimate). According to a 2014 Pew Research survey, the population is 57 percent Catholic; 23 percent Protestant, including Assemblies of God, Church of God, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Mennonites; and 18 percent without religious affiliation. Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) have small numbers in the country.

Most of the approximately 350 Jews live in Santo Domingo, with a small community in Sosua. There are approximately 2,500 to 3,000 Muslims, of whom approximately 100 are noncitizens, most of them students. There are small numbers of Buddhists and Hindus.

Most Haitian immigrants are Catholic. An unknown number practice Voodoo or other African Caribbean beliefs such as Santeria.

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### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and belief. A concordat with the Holy See designates Catholicism as the official religion and extends special privileges to the Catholic Church not granted to other religious groups. These include the legal recognition of Church law, use of public funds to underwrite some Church expenses, and exclusion from customs duties. The Catholic Church retains the authority to revise all textbooks used in public schools throughout the country per the concordat.

To request exclusion from customs duties, non-Catholic religious groups must register as nongovernmental organizations with the attorney general's office and later with the Ministry of Finance and the Directorate General of Custom. Registration with the attorney general's office is a two-step process. First, the organization must provide documentation of a fixed address and the names of seven elected officers. It must have a minimum of 25 members and pay a fee. Second, the organization must draft and submit statutes and provide copies of government-issued identification documents for the board of directors. After registering, religious groups may request custom duties exclusion from the Ministry of Finance.

The law provides for government recognition of marriages performed by all religious groups provided they otherwise comply with the law: Witnesses must be present, parties must prove their identity (e.g. birth certificates) and age (16 for men, 15 for women) and pay a variety of fees.

As part of the concordat with the Vatican, the law requires Bible studies in all public schools, but the government does not normally enforce this law. Private schools are exempt from this requirement. The concordat provides parents with the option of exempting their children from religious studies in public schools.

#### **Government Practices**

Non-Catholic religious groups continued to note the Catholic Church had advantages that they, as nongovernmental organizations, did not. The Catholic Church enjoys broader customs exemption while non-Catholic organizations must pay customs duties and then seek refunds on imported food or other goods

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intended for religious use. These religious groups also continued to report difficulties when applying for and receiving customs duty refunds from the Ministry of Finance. Additionally, non-Catholic missionaries and religious leaders could not obtain visas under the same immigration category as Catholic religious leaders, making it more expensive and difficult to bring missionaries to the country.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials maintained ties with religious representatives and faith groups, meeting with leaders from the Catholic Church, the United Dominican Council for Evangelicals, which represents the Protestant community, officials from the Jewish community, including the one Hasidic rabbi in the country, and leaders from the Muslim community, to discuss religious freedom issues and promote religious tolerance.