

THE BAHAMAS 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states freedom of religion is a fundamental right; individuals may practice freely the religion of their choice or practice no religion at all. The law prohibits discrimination based on religion. Some Rastafarians continued to state the government violated their constitutional right to religious freedom by prohibiting the legal use of marijuana in ceremonial rituals and detaining them for its use. A February preliminary report by the Bahamas National Commission on Marijuana included a recommendation to grant Rastafarians and other religious groups the right to use marijuana for religious purposes. In October, Prime Minister Hubert Minnis announced the government would expunge records of individuals convicted for possession of small amounts of marijuana starting in 2021, although this would require parliament to pass legislation. The government regularly engaged the Bahamas Christian Council (BCC), comprising religious leaders from a wide spectrum of Christian denominations, to discuss societal, political, and economic issues.

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

U.S. embassy representatives met regularly with officials from the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss promoting tolerance and respect for religious diversity in the country. Embassy representatives also met with the president of the BCC, and representatives of the Muslim, Rastafarian, and Jewish communities to discuss the importance of societal tolerance for religious diversity and inquire about how government policies and practices, including COVID-19 restrictions, affected religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 338,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the most recent census in 2010, more than 90 percent of the population professes a religion. Of those, Protestants make up 70 percent of the population; Baptists, 35 percent; Anglicans, 14 percent; Pentecostals, 9 percent; Seventh-day Adventists, 4 percent; Methodists, 4 percent; Church of God members, 2 percent, and Brethren, 2 percent. Twelve percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Other Christians are 13 percent of the population, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Greek Orthodox Christians, and members of The Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. According to the census, five percent is listed as other, having no religion, or unspecified. Other religious groups include Jews, Baha'is, Rastafarians, Muslims, Black Hebrew Israelites, Hindus, and followers of Obeah, which is practiced by a small number of citizens and some resident Haitians. According to a leader of the Rastafarian community, there are more than 10,000 Rastafarians in the country. The leader of the Jewish community estimates there are 500 Jews.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the freedom to practice one's religion. It forbids infringement on an individual's freedom to choose or change his or her religion, and prohibits discrimination based on belief. Parliament may limit religious practices in the interest of defense, public safety, health, public order, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. The constitution refers to "an abiding respect for Christian values" in its preamble; however, there is no state-established religious body or official religion.

The practice of Obeah, an Afro-Caribbean belief system with some similarities to Voodoo, is illegal. Those caught practicing it or attempting to intimidate, steal, inflict disease, or restore a person's health through the practice of Obeah may face a sentence of three months in prison. Reports of violations are infrequent, as Obeah is generally practiced in private on remote islands with no discernable organizing body, but the Royal Bahamas Police Force said it will investigate any credible reports. The publication and sale of any book, writing, or representation deemed blasphemous is punishable by up to two years in prison but opinions on religious issues "expressed in good faith and in decent language" are not subject to prosecution under the law. This law is traditionally not enforced.

The law does not require religious groups to register, but they must legally incorporate to purchase land. There are no legal provisions to encourage or discourage the formation of religious communities, which have the same taxation requirements as profit-making companies if they incorporate. To incorporate, religious groups follow the regulations applicable to nonprofit entities, requiring the "undertaking" of the religious organization to be "without pecuniary gain," and that the group maintains a building for gathering. In accordance with value-added tax (VAT) legislation, religious organizations seeking VAT exemptions must

register with the Ministry of Financial Services, Trade, and Industry and with the Department of Immigration and apply for exemptions on a case-by-case basis.

The law prohibits marijuana use, including for religious rituals.

Religion is a recognized academic subject at government schools and is included in mandatory standardized achievement and certificate tests. Religion classes in government-supported schools focus on the study of Christian philosophy, Biblical texts, and, to a lesser extent, comparative and non-Christian religions. Religious groups may establish private schools. The constitution states no one shall be compelled to participate in religious instruction or observances of a religion other than his or her own. It allows students, or their guardians in the case of minors, to decline to participate in religious education and observance in private schools. Vaccinations are required to attend school. Home schooling is permitted and is regulated by the Ministry of Education.

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

Government Practices

Some Rastafarians continued to state the government violated their constitutional right to religious freedom by prohibiting the legal use of marijuana in ceremonial rituals. Rastafarians said police continued to arrest them for possessing small quantities of marijuana used in ceremonial rituals. They said police were disrespectful and intimidated them during detention. In February, Prime Minister Minnis introduced in parliament's lower house the final preliminary report of the Bahamas National Commission on Marijuana, which recommended Rastafarians and other religious groups who use cannabis for sacramental purposes be allowed to possess, cultivate, and use it for that reason. A representative from the Rastafarian community served on the commission. In October, Prime Minister Minnis announced that starting in 2021, the government would begin to expunge records of individuals convicted for possession of small amounts of marijuana, although this would require parliament to pass legislation. In August, Minnis extended the commission's mandate through June 2021 to allow it to complete a national survey on public views on cannabis use, which would inform its final report.

In October, the government-supported Economic Recovery Committee, formed during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, recommended the legalization of cannabis with strict controls over its production, consumption, and exportation.

The government regularly engaged the BCC to discuss political, economic, and societal issues, including the ongoing debate over whether to legalize use of marijuana. In an October statement, BCC President Bishop Delton Fernander expressed the BCC's opposition to the legalization of marijuana, saying, "The Bahamas Christian Council believes that marijuana or the introduction of a hemp industry is simply not the solution that the country is seeking or needs to address our many woes. We can see no societal or national advantage with the proposal submitted to the government by the Bahamas National Commission on Marijuana."

Unlike in previous years, Rastafarians said during the year that no Rastafarian children were excluded from attending school if they were not vaccinated.

The leader of the Jewish community, Rabbi Sholom Bluming, praised the government for its general openness and respect for religious diversity, saying the government continued to allow the display of menorahs in public spaces during Hanukkah. The leader of the Islamic community, Ameer Faisal Hepburn, said Muslims were able to worship freely without governmental discrimination.

The government continued to include Christian prayer in all significant official events. It was common for government officials and members of parliament to quote religious teachings during speeches, and senior government officials in their official capacities occasionally addressed assemblies during formal religious services.

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 and Engagement

Embassy representatives met regularly with government officials from the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including during the Organization of American States Hemispheric Forum on Freedom of Religion or Belief. They discussed promoting tolerance and respect for religious diversity in the country.

Embassy officials also engaged the president of the BCC, representatives from the Muslim, Rastafarian, and Jewish communities, and civil society leaders to discuss

religious freedom, including the importance of governmental and societal tolerance for religious diversity.