

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and belief. A concordat with the Holy See designates Roman Catholicism as the official state religion and extends to the Catholic Church special privileges not granted to other religious groups. These include funding for expenses, including administration and construction, visa exceptions, and exemptions for customs duties. Some members of non-Catholic groups said they did not approve of the government's preference for the Catholic Church, lack of explicit legal protection for churches beyond what the constitution provided, and treatment of non-Catholic churches as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). According to representatives of non-Catholic groups, a draft law to register and regulate religious entities, if passed, could reduce what they characterized as unequal treatment of religious groups. President Luis Abinader divided the duties of the director of the executive office charged with outreach to the Christian community, with one director overseeing outreach to the evangelical Protestant community and a second director overseeing outreach to the Catholic Church.

In October, the Pontifical University in Santo Domingo, Brigham Young University, the Latin American Consortium of Religious Freedom, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) hosted a virtual symposium titled “Challenges and Opportunities for Religion in the Post-COVID Era.” One of the central themes of the three-day symposium was the importance of interfaith collaboration as a tool for fostering respect for fundamental human rights.

In September, U.S. embassy officials encouraged the Abinader administration to join the United States in reaffirming the fundamental rights set forth in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, including freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The embassy continued to support Holocaust remembrance and education initiatives through grants to the Sosua Jewish Museum and to two U.S. institutions to support the Sosua Jewish Museum’s efforts to preserve and digitize museum archives telling the story of Jewish refugees welcomed to the country after fleeing Nazi persecution. It publicized these efforts on its social media pages. Embassy officials engaged non-Catholic leaders to learn about efforts to pass a law that would create a process specifically to register and regulate religious entities. In August, an embassy official met with the leader of the Interfaith Dialogue

Coalition to discuss religious freedom and the organization’s plans to engage with the incoming government. In December, an embassy officer participated in an interfaith panel discussion sponsored by the Interfaith Dialogue Coalition that included representatives from several Christian denominations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.5 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to a 2019 Latinobarometer survey, the population is 49 percent Catholic, compared with 55 percent in a 2016 Latinobarometer survey and 68 percent in 2008. The same survey indicates 26 percent of the population is evangelical Protestant, compared with 12 percent in 2008. The 2018 Latinobarometer survey found 29.4 percent have no declared religion or identify as atheist or agnostic, compared with 29.1 percent in 2017 and 13 percent in 2015. Other faiths include Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ, and non-evangelical Protestants. According to a November estimate by the Dominican Council of Evangelical Unity, evangelical Protestants make up approximately 30 percent of the population, with the number of Pentecostals growing the fastest.

According to representatives of the Muslim community, there are approximately 2,000 to 2,500 Muslims throughout the country. Jewish leaders state that most of the approximately 350 members of the Jewish community live in Santo Domingo, with a small community in Sosua. There are small numbers of Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha’is.

Most Haitian immigrants are Christians, including evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and Seventh-day Adventists. According to the Dominican National Statistics Office, in 2017, the most recent survey year, there were 498,000 Haitian immigrants in the country. An unknown number practice Voodoo or other Afro-Caribbean beliefs such as Santeria.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of “conscience and worship, subject to public order and respect for social norms.” A 1954 concordat with the Holy See designates Catholicism as the official state religion and extends special privileges to the Catholic Church not granted to other religious groups. These include the

special protection of the state in the exercise of Catholic ministry, exemption of Catholic clergy from military service, permission to provide Catholic instruction in public orphanages, public funding to underwrite some Catholic Church expenses, and exemption from customs duties.

To request exemption from customs duties, non-Catholic religious groups must first register as NGOs with the Attorney General's Office and the Ministry of Finance. Registration with the Attorney General's Office, which applies to nonprofit organizations generally and not specifically for religious groups, is a two-step process. First, the organization must provide documentation of a fixed address and the names of seven elected officers, have a minimum of 25 members, and pay a nominal 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 customs duty exemption status from the Ministry of Finance.

The law provides for government recognition of marriages performed by religious groups registered with the Central Electoral Board. The law requires churches to have legal status and presence in the country for at least five years, provide a membership list, and train clergy on how to perform marriages. Churches are responsible for determining the legal qualification of couples, and they must record all marriages performed in the civil registry within three working days of the marriage. Failure to comply with these regulations may result in misdemeanor sanctions or fines, including 100 pesos (\$2) for each day over the recording deadline, marriage license suspension, or up to five years in prison.

The concordat grants the Catholic Church free access to prisons. The government states it allows access to all faiths in prisons. Prisoners of all faiths have the right to perform religious acts in prisons, in community or alone.

The concordat and a subsequent biblical studies law ratified in 2000 require religious studies based in either Catholic or evangelical Protestant teachings in all elementary and secondary public schools. It provides parents with the option of excusing their children from this course. Private schools are exempt from the biblical studies requirement; private schools run by religious groups may teach religious studies according to their beliefs.

The biblical studies law also mandates the Bible be read in public schools at the beginning of each day after the national anthem. This aspect of the law is currently not enforced.

Foreign missionaries may obtain a one-year multi-entry business visa through the Ministry of Foreign Relations after submitting a document offering proof of the business activity from the institution or person in the country with whom the missionary is affiliated. Foreign missionaries may renew the visa before the original one-year visa has expired.

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

Government Practices

After his inauguration in August, newly elected President Abinader divided the duties of the director of the executive office charged with outreach to the Christian community, with one director overseeing outreach to the evangelical Protestant community and a second director overseeing outreach to the Catholic Church. Under former President Danilo Medina, a Catholic bishop directed the office. Protestant groups expressed support for this change and stated they hoped it reflected a willingness on the part of the new administration to treat all religious denominations equally.

Non-Catholic religious groups continued to state that the government provided the Catholic Church significant financial support unavailable to them, including properties transferred to the Catholic Church and subsidies to support salaries of Catholic Church officials. They expressed dissatisfaction with the government's preference for the Catholic Church, lack of explicit legal protection for religious groups beyond what the constitution provides, and treatment under the law of non-Catholic churches as NGOs rather than as religious organizations. In March 2019, a draft law to register and regulate religious entities was reintroduced and considered in the lower house of congress. The bill expired early in the year when the congress ended its session, and was not reintroduced.

In May, then-President Medina met with representatives from the Catholic Church and various Protestant churches to discuss appropriate protocols for religious observance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Debate about reading the Bible in public schools continued. In 2019, the Ministry of Education issued a statement saying it would not enforce a law requiring the reading of the Bible in public schools because it violated the constitution and the rights of families to decide what faith their children practice. As of year's end, the new government had not taken a position on the subject.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In October, the Pontifical University in Santo Domingo, Brigham Young University, the Latin American Consortium of Religious Freedom, and the Church of Jesus Christ hosted a virtual symposium entitled, “Challenges and Opportunities for Religion in the Post-COVID Era.” This three-day symposium featured presentations from 48 experts who addressed religious freedom from the perspectives of rights and responsibilities, including presentations on the status of religious freedom in Latin America and the Caribbean. One of the central themes of the symposium was the importance of interfaith collaboration as a tool for fostering respect for fundamental human rights around the world. The newly-appointed director of the liaison office between the executive branch and the evangelical Protestant community, Pastor Dio Astacio, spoke at the symposium. He focused his remarks on what he stated were the country’s strong legal and cultural respect for free expression of religion. He expressed concern, however, that the country did not have equality of religious expression and that the Roman Catholic Church enjoyed favored status.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials engaged the Abinader administration on issues of religious freedom. In September, embassy officials encouraged the administration to join the United States in reaffirming the fundamental rights set forth in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, including freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The Ambassador also raised this issue with the country’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations. The embassy continued to support Holocaust remembrance and education initiatives through a grant, first awarded in 2019, to the Sosua Jewish Museum, to preserve and digitize its archives. The focus of the grant was to help the museum tell the story of European Jews who found safe haven and religious freedom in the country during the Holocaust. During the year, the embassy awarded an additional grant to the project that aimed to develop a professional exchange with two U.S. institutions, the Woodson Research Center at Rice University and the Holocaust Museum Houston, by sharing their expertise in preservation and curation to enable the museum to manage its collections, increase public access to records, and amplify its message.

The embassy also conducted a Twitter campaign that included video clips of an interview with a long-time Sosua resident who arrived in the country as a child in 1947. In the interview, he emphasized the significance of the welcome provided to

Jewish refugees from Europe at a time when very few other countries accepted them.

Embassy officials engaged religious leaders, including the Consejo Dominicano de Unidad Evangelica and the Interfaith Dialogue Coalition, to discuss religious freedom, efforts to pass a law that would create a process specifically to register and regulate religious entities, and the organizations' plans to engage with the incoming government. In December, an embassy officer participated in a panel discussion sponsored by the Interfaith Dialogue Coalition, speaking about the importance of religious liberty in helping to bring religious and government leaders together to promote mutual respect and cooperation.