

# **THE BAHAMAS 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution states freedom of religion is a fundamental right; individuals have the right to practice freely the religion of their choice or to practice no religion at all. The law prohibits discrimination based on religion. Practice of Obeah, an Afro-Caribbean belief system with some similarities to Voodoo, is illegal. Violators may face a sentence of three months in prison; however, according to Royal Bahamas Police Force officials, this law is inconsistently enforced. The government continued to include Christian prayer in all significant official events. Rastafarians said the government discriminated against them because of their use of marijuana and dreadlocks. The government met regularly with the Bahamas Christian Council (BCC), comprising religious leaders from a wide spectrum of Christian denominations – including Baptist, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Pentecostal, Church of God, and Brethren – 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 government officials, the president of the BCC, and representatives of the Muslim, Rastafarian, and Jewish communities to discuss issues of religious freedom. Embassy representatives discussed with Jewish and Muslim groups these groups' concerns regarding participation of their children in Christian activities offered in public schools.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 333,000 (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2010 census, more than 90 percent of the population professes a religion. Of those, 70 percent is Protestant (includes Baptist 35 percent, Anglican 14 percent, Pentecostal 9 percent, Seventh-day Adventist 4 percent, Methodist 4 percent, Church of God 2 percent, and Brethren 2 percent). Twelve percent is Roman Catholic. Other Christians are 13 percent (includes Jehovah's Witnesses, Greek Orthodox Christians, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). 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 Obeah, which a small number of citizens and some resident Haitians practice.

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

### Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the right to worship and to practice one's religion. It forbids infringement on an individual's freedom to choose or change one's 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, but there were no such actions reported during the year. 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 to health through the practice of Obeah may face a sentence of three months in prison. According to Royal Bahamas Police Force officials, this law is inconsistently enforced.

The publication and sale of any book, writing, or representation deemed blasphemous is punishable by up to two years in prison; however, opinions on religious issues "expressed in good faith and in decent language" are not subject to prosecution under the law. This law is traditionally unenforced.

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 profitmaking 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 to maintain a building for gathering. In accordance with VAT legislation, religious organizations seeking VAT exemptions must register with the Ministry of Financial Services, Trade and Industry, and Immigration and apply on a case-by-case basis for exemptions.

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. In government schools, students may not opt out of religious education, a core part of final examinations.

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

### **Government Practices**

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.

Rastafarians continued to be arrested for possessing small quantities of marijuana they used in ceremonial rituals and subjected to having their hair (locks) cut in prison. Rastafarians stated officials required family members of Rastafarian prisoners to pay to receive a vegetarian diet while in prison. Rastafarians also said the government discriminated against them in discussions on the legalization of marijuana for medicinal use.

In an effort to engage religious communities, which frequently comment on government social and economic policies, the government met regularly with the BCC to discuss societal, political, and economic issues. Additionally, the government actively engaged with the Muslim community to develop opportunities for non-Muslim students to learn about Islam by having students visit the mosque to speak with local Muslim leaders.

### **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**

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials and the president of the BCC regularly to discuss religious freedom.

Embassy representatives increased their engagement with a wide variety of religious groups, including the BCC and smaller groups, which included the Jewish, Muslim, and Rastafarian communities. Embassy representatives discussed with Jewish and Muslim groups these groups' concerns regarding participation of their children in Christian activities offered in public schools.