

SAINT LUCIA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and individuals' right to change, manifest, and propagate the religion of their choosing; it grants religious groups the right to establish and maintain schools and provide religious instruction. The law requires religious groups with more than 250 members to register. According to an imam associated with the Islamic Association, the association experienced delays in registering, preventing the group from officially registering marriages, births, and other official acts. A Jewish community representative said it had requested the government to lower the community registration threshold to 200 members. According to Rastafarian representatives, because marijuana use was illegal and subject to punitive fines, Rastafarians hesitated to use it for religious purposes. In July the government established a commission to review and make recommendations on the regulatory framework for cannabis; it met for the first time in October. The Ministry of Education increased enforcement of required vaccinations for all children attending school but granted some waivers on religious grounds. National insurance plans did not cover traditional doctors used by the Rastafarian community, according to community members. Rastafarians again reported officials from the Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Empowerment, Youth Development, Sports, and Local Government engaged in constructive dialogue and outreach with the Rastafarian community.

According to a local imam with the Islamic Association, some male and female members of the Muslim community experienced verbal harassment when they wore head coverings and clothing that identified them as Muslim. The Christian Council, comprised of the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and Methodist Churches, the Salvation Army, and the Evangelical Association of the Caribbean, continued to hold interdenominational meetings to promote respect for religious diversity and tolerance.

U.S embassy officials discussed the status of public consultations on marijuana decriminalization, the Religious Advisory Committee, and general issues related to respect for religious minorities with officials of the Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Empowerment, Youth Development, Sports, and Local Government, which is responsible for issues regarding religious groups. Embassy officials also discussed on several occasions in October, November, and December issues related to religious freedom with leaders of the Rastafarian, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 166,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census, Roman Catholics are 61.4 percent of the population; Seventh-day Adventists, 10.4 percent; Pentecostals, 8.8 percent; evangelical Christians, 2.2 percent; Baptists, 2.1 percent; and Rastafarians, 2 percent. Other groups, together constituting less than 2 percent of the population, include Anglicans, members of the Church of God, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Muslims, Hindus, and Baha'is. Nearly 6 percent of the population claims no religious affiliation. Unofficial estimates of the Muslim population, which is mainly Sunni, ranges from 150 to 400 individuals. According to the Jewish community, there are approximately 200 Jewish residents, most of whom are not citizens.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states “a person shall not be hindered in the enjoyment of” freedom of conscience, including of thought and religion, and in the manifestation and propagation of religion or belief through practice, worship, teaching, and observance. It protects individuals’ rights to change their religion and prohibits religious instruction without consent in schools, prisons, and military service. A blasphemy law is not enforced.

The Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Empowerment, Youth Development, Sports, and Local Government is responsible for religious affairs, implements the government’s policy on faith-based organizations, and meets regularly with religious groups to address their concerns. The government requires religious groups to register with the ministry if their membership exceeds 250 individuals. To register, groups must provide contact information, their establishment date and history, declaration of belief, number of members, location of meeting place, and income sources. The government “incorporates” registered groups, which are eligible to receive associated benefits, while it treats unregistered groups as for-profit organizations for taxation purposes. After the religious group registers with the ministry, it may apply for concessions, including duty-free import privileges, tax benefits, and exemption from some labor requirements. Formal government registration also allows registered religious groups to legally register marriages officiated by religious leaders.

Ministry of Education regulations require the vaccination of all schoolchildren, regardless of religious beliefs, before they enter public or private school. The public school curriculum includes religious studies; the Ministry of Education does not require students to participate in these classes. The classes familiarize students with the core beliefs of world religions rather than promoting the adoption of any particular faith. The constitution grants religious groups the right to establish and maintain schools and provide religious instruction at their own expense. The Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, and Anglican Churches each sponsor private schools, where they teach their respective religious beliefs to students. The government provides approximately 50 percent of the funding for these schools but does not cover expenses for classes on religion. All students may attend private religious schools regardless of belief or nonbelief.

The government's registration policy defines the process of obtaining work and labor permits for missionaries. Immigration authorities grant work permits for individuals entering the country to conduct missionary work. As long as an individual is law abiding, there are no restrictions on any category of foreign missionaries.

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

Government Practices

An imam with the Islamic Association said the association continued to experience delays in obtaining government approval for its registration application. Formal government registration would extend to the association equivalent legal authorities extended to other faiths, such as the right to register marriages performed in a mosque. He said that, because the group remained unregistered, newlywed community members had to pay a lawyer to legally register marriages with the government. The imam said the Islamic Association began the registration process in 2018 but stated "bureaucratic lethargy" was the key reason registration had not yet been granted. A government official said that for most applications, the most time consuming part of the process was verifying anti-money laundering compliance through the Financial Action Task Force, a process that could take up to two years.

A representative of the Jewish community said it had requested the government lower the community registration threshold to 200 members. He said the government had previously revised the threshold downward from 500 to 250.

The Rastafarian community again stated officials from the Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Empowerment, Youth Development, Sports, and Local Government engaged in constructive dialogue with their community leaders and outreach with the broader Rastafarian community. They said the primary issue discussed was encouraging the government to legalize marijuana for religious purposes. In July the government established a commission to develop recommendations regarding possible steps towards legalizing or decriminalizing marijuana. The commission's mandate focused on the commercial benefits of cannabis production. According to a government official, the commission was required as part of the public consultations needed to amend the constitution, but the Rastafarian community said the government was using the commission to delay making a decision on decriminalization or legalization until after the next parliamentary election in 2021. Composed primarily of government officials but also including a representative from the Rastafarian community, the commission's inaugural meeting was in October.

Rastafarian community representatives reported their reluctance to use marijuana for religious purposes because marijuana use was illegal and subject to punitive fines. Rastafarians said during the year targeted searches by police and immigration officers had shifted from towns and villages to the hills where marijuana plantations were often located.

While members of the Rastafarian community stated the Ministry of Education had increased enforcement of regulations requiring the vaccination of schoolchildren to enter school, they said the government sometimes provided waivers to Rastafarian families that cited their religious belief in not vaccinating their children. Some Rastafarians said they decided to vaccinate their children so they could attend school when a waiver was not granted; others chose to homeschool. According to Rastafarian representatives, the government granted waivers when parents clearly cited religion as the basis for the request; if this information was not provided, the government did not approve the waiver. Rastafarians stated the lack of insurance coverage for traditional doctors some Rastafarians used continued to be a problem due to high costs.

The government continued to consult with the Pentecostal Assemblies of the West Indies, as well as the Christian Council, comprising representatives of the Catholic Church and some Protestant denominations, on issues relevant to their communities. It also continued its informal meetings with members of the Rastafarian community on pending legislation and policies, including certification

of priests to sign marriage certificates, issues surrounding required vaccinations for school attendance, and cannabis legalization.

The government also continued to consult with the Religious Advisory Committee, comprised of leaders from different religious communities, to develop regulatory and legal reforms and program recommendations for approval by the cabinet of ministers.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

An imam associated with the Islamic Association said members of society generally accepted the Muslim community. He said neighbors accepted the daily calls to prayer; however, members of the community continued to report verbal harassment in public spaces when they wore Islamic religious attire. They said harassment included insulting name-calling and inappropriate questioning by members of the public. Rastafarians also reported being “accepted by society,” but occasionally individuals voiced opposition to the Rastafarian faith.

The Christian Council and the Evangelical Association of the Caribbean continued to hold interdenominational meetings to promote respect for religious diversity and tolerance. Various religious groups said they were collaborating to further social dialogue and conduct outreach programs in the community that addressed freedom of religious expression, tolerance, and discrimination.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials discussed the status of public consultations on marijuana decriminalization, the Religious Advisory Committee, and general issues related to respect for religious minorities with officials of the Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Empowerment, Youth Development, Sports, and Local Government. Embassy officials also engaged with Rastafarian, Muslim, Jewish, and Catholic leaders on the importance of promoting freedom of religious expression and combating societal discrimination based on religion.