

SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom of individuals to change their religion. Rastafarians continued to disagree with the government's ban on marijuana, stating it was integral to their religious rituals. They said, however, that draft legislation introduced in September allowing marijuana use for religious purposes, if passed, would positively affect their community. The possibility of exemption from vaccinations currently required for school enrollment remained under discussion between Ministry of Health officials and Rastafarians with school-age children. Ministry of Education, Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information officials continued to permit dreadlocks at some workplaces, such as construction sites, provided they were covered with appropriate headgear when health and safety considerations required it.

Rastafarians said they still faced societal discrimination because of their religious practices, in particular their marijuana use. Some Rastafarians stated, however, that they believed societal acceptance of and tolerance for Rastafarians continued to increase, noting the draft legislation on marijuana use and cultivation introduced in parliament as an example of a positive change in societal attitudes.

Embassy officials continued to raise the issue of Rastafarian dreadlocks with the Ministry of Education, Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information and with the Ministry of National Mobilization, Social Development, Family, Gender Affairs, Persons with Disabilities, and Youth. Embassy officials also met with individuals from the Christian, Muslim, and Rastafarian communities to discuss governmental and societal support for religious freedom, including respect for religious minorities. The embassy used Facebook to promote messages about the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity across the Eastern Caribbean.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 102,000 (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2012 government census, 82.3 percent of the population identifies as Christian, among them Pentecostals composing 27.6 percent, Anglicans 13.9 percent, Seventh-day Adventists 11.6 percent, Baptists 8.9 percent, Methodists 8.7 percent, and Roman Catholics 6.3 percent. Rastafarians

account for 1.1 percent of the population. Those with no religious affiliation account for 7.5 percent of the population; those listed as “no religion stated” constitute 4.7 percent; and those listed as “other religion” constitute 4.3 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Muslims and Hindus, the latter primarily of East Indian origin. There is no organized Jewish community.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution affirms the country “is founded on the belief in the supremacy of God.” A person has the right to freedom of conscience, including freedom of thought and of religion and freedom to change his or her religion or belief. In addition, he or she has the freedom to practice his religion, either alone or in community with others, and both in public and in private. An anti-blasphemy law exists, but it is not enforced.

The constitution grants religious groups the right to establish schools and provide religious instruction to those wishing to receive it. Students in public schools receive nondenominational religious instruction based on Christianity. Christian prayers are recited at school assemblies; attendance and participation are not mandatory. Students wishing to opt out of Christian prayer or religious education classes are excused from participation. By law, vaccinations are required for school enrollment in all schools receiving government funding. Home schooling is also an option.

The law prohibits the use of marijuana, including for religious purposes.

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

Government Practices

Rastafarian activists continued to state they disagreed with the government’s prohibition of marijuana use, which they described as integral to their religious rituals. Legislation was introduced in September to permit marijuana use for religious activities. The proposed legislation would decriminalize the use of marijuana in adherence to a religious practice by religious bodies to include, but not limited to, Rastafarians. Reactions to the proposal ranged from support for marijuana use for religious purposes from the Rastafarian community and the

current administration to concern expressed by members of the opposition party as well as other religious groups that the proposal was advanced too quickly through parliament.

The Ministry of Education, Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information said accommodations permitted dreadlocks for Rastafarians at some workplaces, including construction sites, with appropriate headgear called a Tam or Rastacap, which is similar to an elongated ski cap. Rastafarians, however, cited the continued prohibition of dreadlocks in certain work areas and in some private schools. According to Rastafarians, vaccinations as a requirement for school enrollment continued to remain an area of contention between Ministry of Health officials and Rastafarians with school-age children. Some Rastafarians said they decided to vaccinate their children; others chose homeschooling. Some Rastafarians said they still faced scrutiny from police and immigration officials due to their marijuana use.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Rastafarian individuals stated they continued to face societal discrimination primarily due to their marijuana use. They stated, however, that they also were increasingly accepted in society and overall the country's citizens were becoming more tolerant of their way of life. Some pointed out the recently introduced draft legislation for medical marijuana as proof of this societal change. Rastafarians said they still faced discrimination in the both private and public job markets due to their appearance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials continued to raise Rastafarian concerns about the prohibition of dreadlocks and the vaccination issue with the Ministry of National Mobilization, Social Development, Family, Gender Affairs, Persons with Disabilities, and Youth, as well as with the Ministry of Education, Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information. Embassy officials also discussed governmental and societal support for religious freedom, including respect for religious minorities, with members of the Christian, Muslim, and Rastafarian communities.

The embassy used Facebook to promote messages about the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity across the Eastern Caribbean.