

THE BAHAMAS 2019 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. The 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. Rastafarians said the government continued to discriminate against them because of their dreadlocks and their religious use of marijuana. A preliminary report by the Bahamas National Commission on Marijuana, leaked to media in December, included a recommendation to grant Rastafarians the right to use marijuana for religious purposes. The government continued to meet regularly with 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 government officials, the president of the BCC, and representatives of the Muslim, Rastafarian, and Jewish communities to discuss religious freedom, including the importance of governmental and societal tolerance for religious diversity.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 335,000 (midyear 2019 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, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Greek Orthodox Christians, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. According to the census, 5 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, practiced by a small number of citizens and some resident Haitians.

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 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; 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's 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 value-added tax (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. 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

A preliminary report by the Bahamas National Commission on Marijuana, leaked to media in December, included a recommendation to grant Rastafarians the right to use marijuana for religious purposes. A representative from the Rastafarian community participated in the commission. Prime Minister Hubert Minnis, whose party had a strong legislative majority, was an outspoken advocate of reforming marijuana laws. Parliament took no legal action on the recommendation by year's end.

During the year, Rastafarians said police continued to arrest them for possessing small quantities of marijuana used in ceremonial rituals and said prison authorities cut the dreadlocks of Rastafarian prisoners. In June a group of Rastafarians, citing articles of the constitution that provide for freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination, filed a writ in the Supreme Court seeking damages from – and the expungement from their records of – marijuana-related convictions.

In what observers termed was an effort to engage religious communities, whose members frequently commented on government social and economic policies, the government met regularly with the BCC to discuss societal, political, and economic issues. Additionally, the government engaged with the Muslim community to develop opportunities for non-Muslim students to learn about Islam by having students visit the Jamaa Ahlus mosque to speak with local Muslim leaders. A leader of the Jewish community praised the government for its general openness and solidarity, citing as an example the government's support in allowing a nine-foot menorah to be displayed in downtown Nassau during Hanukkah.

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, 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.