

SAINT KITTS AND NEVIS 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion. In May a High Court decision ruled unconstitutional the government's ban on the private use of marijuana, including for religious activities, which affects some practitioners of Rastafarianism. In August the government had the first reading of legislation legalizing marijuana for "medicinal and scientific, religious and recreational purposes." The legislation remained pending at year's end. In January the government launched the National School Chaplaincy Programme (NSCP) for both public and private schools. The NSCP is open to all religious leaders and "provides additional support for students, teachers, and parents in personal, moral, emotional, and spiritual development matters," providing funding for spiritual leaders to attend school assemblies, conduct home visits, perform grief counseling, and provide pastoral services during school events. The Ministry of Health continued to require the immunization of children before enrolling in school, but it offered waivers for unvaccinated Rastafarian children. A Rastafarian community representative said the government maintained an open dialogue with Rastafarian community leaders to discuss improving employment opportunities for Rastafarians.

According to a Rastafarian community representative, Rastafarians continued to face some societal discrimination, particularly in seeking private-sector employment, but the representative noted an improvement in societal attitudes toward the community during the year. The representative confirmed that some businesses continued to place restrictions on dreadlocks in some instances when required by safety and hygiene regulations.

U.S. embassy officials engaged representatives of the government and civil society on religious freedom issues, including government promotion of religious diversity and tolerance, equal treatment under the law, and the required vaccination of children entering the school system.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 53,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 17 percent of the population is Anglican; 16 percent Methodist; 11 percent Pentecostal; 7 percent Church of God; 6 percent

Roman Catholic; 5 percent each Baptist, Moravian, Seventh-day Adventist, and Wesleyan Holiness; 4 percent other; and 2 percent each Brethren, evangelical Christian, and Hindu. An additional 1 percent each is Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslim, and Rastafarian; less than 1 percent each is Baha'i, Presbyterian, and Salvation Army. Nine percent state no religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom of individuals to change their religion. It prohibits discrimination based on religious belief.

The Ministry of Nevis Affairs, Labor, Social Security, and Ecclesiastical Affairs is responsible for registering religious groups. Religious groups are not required to register but doing so provides the government with a database of contacts through which it disseminates information on government policy for religious groups. Registration also allows religious groups to act as charities and import religious items duty-free.

The constitution allows religious groups to establish and maintain schools at the group's own expense. Public schools offer Christian religious instruction, daily prayers, and religious assemblies; students who do not want to attend are exempt from all religious activities. Public schools require vaccinations for children to attend school.

According to a High Court ruling in May, the government's ban on the private use of marijuana, including for religious activities, is unconstitutional and Rastafarians may smoke marijuana as part of their religious activities.

The law does not prohibit the wearing of dreadlocks; however, businesses may restrict it for safety or hygiene reasons. Occupational safety and health laws require all employees, including those with dreadlocks, to cover their hair when using dangerous equipment, handling food, or undertaking health-related activities.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In July, following the High Court ruling in May finding two sections of the Drugs Act unconstitutional, the government introduced legislation legalizing marijuana for “medicinal and scientific, religious and recreational purposes.” The court gave the government 90 days to amend the law. According to Eddy Ventose, a judge on the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court, “The constitutional issues in this case are narrow ones, and focus only on the use, possession, and cultivation of cannabis by adults for use in the Rastafari religion and also the use, possession, and cultivation of cannabis by adults in private for personal consumption.” In August the government had the first reading of legislation legalizing marijuana for “medicinal and scientific, religious and recreational purposes.” The legislation remained pending in parliament at year’s end.

In January the government launched the NSCP for both public and private schools, based on a similar Australian program launched in 2011. According to the NSCP, it “provides additional support for students, teachers, and parents in personal, moral, emotional, and spiritual development matters,” providing funding for spiritual leaders to attend school assemblies, conduct home visits, perform grief counseling, and provide pastoral services during school events.

In August several media reports noted the government undertook a review of the NSCP and reportedly was willing to continue the program. The reports stated that 50 spiritual leaders participated in the NCSP review, and that the government expected to enlist an additional 20. Senior Minister and Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs Vance Armory expressed his support for the NCSP. He said numerous educators opposed religious-themed assemblies in public and private schools but stated his support for the program, adding, “One thing that we will not discuss is the removal of the things of God and spiritual things from our schools.”

The Ministry of Health continued to require the immunization of all children before enrolling in school, but Organization for Rastafarian Unity (ORU) sources said the government allowed waivers for unvaccinated Rastafarian children attending public schools. Some children of the Rastafarian community were home schooled.

Prison officials allowed Rastafarian prisoners to keep their dreadlocks unless they posed health-related issues or were used to transport contraband. The prison did not provide different diets based on prisoners’ religious dietary restrictions. A Rastafarian community representative said talks were ongoing with the government to address the community’s dietary requirements.

A Rastafarian community representative said the government maintained an open dialogue with Rastafarian community leaders to discuss improving employment opportunities for Rastafarians.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to a Rastafarian community spokesman, Rastafarians continued to face some societal discrimination, including in the job market. He also said private-sector employment discrimination of Rastafarians continued to decline during the year. The St. Kitts and Nevis Christian Council, which includes the Anglican, Methodist, Moravian, and Roman Catholic Churches, the Salvation Army, and the Evangelical Association, including the Church of God and Pentecostal Assemblies, continued to promote joint activities, particularly encouraging tolerance in schools.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials engaged representatives of the government on religious freedom issues, including the importance of respect for religious diversity. They discussed issues involving government support for tolerance and equal treatment under the law, as well as vaccination requirements for children entering the school system.

Embassy officials met with representatives from the Christian and Rastafarian communities to discuss religious freedom issues, including the importance of freedom of religious expression, and discrimination based on religion.