

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and belief. A concordat with the Holy See designates Roman Catholicism as the official state religion and extends special privileges to the Catholic Church not granted to other religious groups. These include funding for church expenses, including administration and construction, visa exceptions, and exemptions for customs duties for Church officials. On April 23, the government started implementing a law on the regulation of penitentiary and correctional systems that included provisions allowing prisoners of all faiths, not just Catholics, the right to practice their religion and seek counseling from officiants of their faith. Some members of non-Catholic groups continued to say they disapproved of the government's preference for the Catholic Church, the lack of explicit legal protection for non-Catholic churches beyond what the constitution provides, and the treatment of non-Catholic churches as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Non-Catholic organizations frequently stated their belief that the government should improve its relationship with other religious entities. During the year, the Chamber of Deputies' (lower chamber) Permanent Commission on Culture debated a draft law that would no longer require non-Catholic religious entities to register as NGOs, provide tax exempt status, and allow for increased government funding for these groups. According to Protestant leaders, passing the law would be a step in the right direction, but it would still be difficult to change the "hearts and minds" of both the government and the average citizen because Catholicism was deeply rooted in the country's culture.

According to evangelical leaders, Catholicism, Catholic practices, and Catholic holidays formed a big part of the country's culture, and Catholic traditions were deeply intertwined with many aspects of life, including government and politics, marriage, family gatherings, and education, among others. Some non-Catholic religious leaders said non-Catholic religious groups should focus more on seeking cultural change through helping the population understand and value religious freedom and the right to freely practice one's religious beliefs. The Interfaith Dialogue Table, comprising members of all major Protestant church councils, continued to work together and with other religious groups to provide assistance to poor communities regardless of the religious affiliations of members of those communities.

Embassy officials engaged the administration of President Luis Abinader and other government leaders on issues of religious freedom, including equal treatment of Catholic and non-Catholic religious groups under the law and the ability of parents to decide for their children whether they partake or not in religious activities in school. The Charge d’Affaires engaged officials from the Catholic Church, the Dominican Evangelical Fellowship, the Evangelical Church, and the Sosua Jewish Museum and Sosua Synagogue. These interactions provided the opportunity to discuss religious freedom issues, especially the groups’ relationship with the new administration and any perceived societal or governmental challenges to their constituencies’ free exercise of religion. Embassy officials also engaged religious organizations on pending legislation that would remove the requirement that non-Catholic religious entities register as NGOs and would provide greater funding for these groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.6 million (midyear 2021). According to a 2019 Latinobarometer survey, the population is 49 percent Catholic, compared with 55 percent in a 2016 Latinobarometer survey and 68 percent in 2008. The 2019 survey indicates 26 percent of the population is evangelical Protestant, compared with 12 percent in 2008. The 2018 Latinobarometer survey found 29.4 percent of the population has no declared religion or identify as atheist or agnostic, compared with 29.1 percent in 2017 and 13 percent in 2015. Other faiths include Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and nonevangelical Protestants. According to a November 2020 estimate by the Dominican Council of Evangelical Unity, evangelical Protestants make up approximately 30 percent of the population, with the number of Pentecostals growing the fastest.

According to representatives of the Muslim community, there are approximately 3,000-4,000 Muslims throughout the country, a number that is increasing annually, according to news reports. Jewish leaders state that most of the approximately 350 members of the Jewish community live in Santo Domingo, with a small community in Sosua. There are also small numbers of Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha’is.

Most Haitian immigrants are Christians, including evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and Seventh-day Adventists. According to the Dominican National Statistics Office, in 2017, the most recent survey year, there were 498,000 Haitian

immigrants in the country. An unknown number practice Voodoo or other Afro-Caribbean beliefs such as Santeria.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of “conscience and worship, subject to public order and respect for social norms.” A 1954 concordat with the Holy See designates Catholicism as the official state religion and extends special privileges to the Catholic Church not granted to other religious groups. These include the special protection of the state in the exercise of Catholic ministry, exemption of Catholic clergy from military service, permission to provide Catholic instruction in public orphanages, public funding to underwrite some Catholic Church expenses, and exemption from customs duties. Nationally recognized holidays also include days that are only observed by Catholics.

To request exemption from customs duties, non-Catholic religious groups must first register as NGOs with the Attorney General’s Office and the Ministry of Finance. Registration with the Attorney General’s Office is a two-step process. The organization must provide documentation of a fixed address and the names of seven elected officers, have a minimum of 25 members, and pay a nominal fee. The organization must also draft and submit statutes and provide copies of government-issued identification documents for the board of directors. After registering, religious groups request customs duty exemption status from the Ministry of Finance, which is not always granted.

The law stipulates the government recognizes only marriages performed by religious groups registered with the Central Electoral Board. The law requires churches to have legal status and be present in the country for at least five years, provide a membership list, and train clergy on how to perform marriages. Churches are responsible for determining the legal qualification of couples as the law prohibits same sex marriages as well as marriages for persons younger than 18, and churches must record all marriages in the civil registry within three working days of the marriage. According to the law, failure to comply with these regulations may result in a misdemeanor charge, including 100 pesos (\$2) for each day beyond the recording deadline, suspension of a marriage license, or up to five years in prison.

The concordat grants the Catholic Church full access to prisons, and only the Catholic Church is legally guaranteed access to prisoners. Prisoners of all faiths have the right to practice their religion under a new law on the regulation of penitentiary and correctional systems that went into effect on April 23. The new law establishes freedom of religion for all persons deprived of their liberty, while also allowing the Catholic Church to have a representative in every prison.

The concordat and a subsequent biblical studies law ratified in 2000 require that religious studies based in either Catholic or evangelical Protestant teachings be taught in all elementary and secondary public schools. Parents, however, may excuse their children from this course. Private schools are exempt from the biblical studies requirement, although private schools run by religious groups may opt to teach religious studies.

The biblical studies law also mandates public schools read the Bible at the beginning of each day after the national anthem, although this is not enforced.

Foreign missionaries may obtain a one-year, multi-entry business visa through the Ministry of Foreign Relations after submitting proof of their affiliation with the relevant religious institution in the country. Foreign missionaries may renew their visa before the original one-year visa has expired.

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

Government Practices

Non-Catholic religious groups continued to state that the government provided the Catholic Church significant financial support and other benefits unavailable to them, including transferring properties to the Catholic Church, providing monetary assistance for the Catholic Church to build new places of worship, and giving subsidies to support salaries of Church officials. They expressed dissatisfaction with the government's preference for the Catholic Church, lack of explicit legal protection for religious groups beyond what the constitution provides, and treatment under the law of non-Catholic churches as NGOs rather than as religious organizations. Protestant leaders, however, said the current government led by President Abinader paid more attention to Protestants than previous administrations. A Church of Jesus Christ representative said his Church maintained a constructive relationship with the Protestant Liaison to the Executive Power, which he said highlighted how non-Catholic outreach extended beyond the

larger and more established Protestant groups, such as Episcopalians, Baptists, and Pentecostals.

On April 23, the government started implementing a law on the regulation of penitentiary and correctional systems that included provisions allowing prisoners of all faiths, not just Catholics, the right to practice their religion and seek counseling from officiants of their faith. The Catholic Church continued to have a representative in every prison.

Deliberation continued on a draft law that, if passed, would allow other religious organizations to receive the same benefits as the Catholic Church, such as funding from the government and additional tax exemptions. The draft law was introduced in 2019 but the required period during which the draft needed to pass expired in early 2020 without the Legislative Assembly passing it. The law was reintroduced in June in the lower chamber and sent for review to the Permanent Commission on Culture, a legislative subcommittee. The Legislative Assembly had until mid-January 2022 to pass the proposed law. According to some Protestant leaders, approval of the proposed law would be a step in the right direction, but it would still be difficult to change the “hearts and minds” of both the government and the average citizen because Catholicism was so deeply rooted in the country’s culture and history. They said it would take a “cultural shift” both within the public and the government to see any significant progress towards fully equal treatment. Catholic Church representatives said they did not oppose the new law but that they would not advocate for it either, as they did not see it as “their issue.”

Some Protestant leaders said the government should open a department of religious affairs instead of working through liaisons from different Christian denominations, in order to be more responsive to all religious groups. According to some civil society organizations, they feared some religious groups, mainly Catholics, exerted too much influence in politics and government, thereby limiting the ability of non-Catholic groups to advance their own priorities.

On June 30, the Chamber of Deputies approved a draft penal code that critics alleged would allow discrimination in employment, housing, and health services against LGBTQI+ persons and other marginalized communities based on “religious requirements.” According to Amnesty International, the draft code also declined to decriminalize abortions in three circumstances. The draft code was largely supported by Catholic and Protestant churches. In November, the Senate approved the most recent iteration of the draft code, which included “sexual orientation” as a protected category and changed “religious requirements” to

“without detriment to the liberty of conscience and worship.” The draft code was then sent to the lower chamber for deliberation, where legislators rejected it on December 16. Several legislators said they expect to reintroduce the bill during the next legislative session in February 2022.

In December 2020, the Ministry of Education presented the National Plan for the Promotion of Books and Reading for the new school cycle, which included the provision of Bibles in public schools. Although supporters of the implementation of the plan said the use of the Bible in public schools was not mandatory, the minister announced the distribution of thousands of Bibles to public schools starting on September 20. Many individuals opposed the distribution of the Bibles because they did not identify with any religion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to evangelical Protestant leaders, Catholicism, Catholic practices, and Catholic holidays formed a big part of the country’s culture, and Catholic traditions were deeply intertwined with many aspects of life, including government and politics, marriage, family gatherings, and education, among others.

Some non-Catholic religious leaders said non-Catholic religious groups should focus more on the value of cultural change to help the population understand and value religious freedom and the right to freely practice one’s religious beliefs. Representatives of some non-Catholic religious groups also said they were concerned that both governmental and societal discrimination against non-Catholic groups would continue even if the law that would allow non-Catholic religious groups to receive the same benefits as the Catholic Church were passed, because of the entrenched position of Catholicism in the country.

The Interfaith Dialogue Table, comprising members of all major Protestant church councils, continued to work together and with other religious groups, including the Jewish community, to provide assistance to poor communities, regardless of the religious affiliations of members of those communities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials engaged the Abinader administration and other government officials throughout the year on issues of religious freedom, including equal treatment of Catholic and non-Catholic religious groups under the law and the

ability of parents to decide for their children whether they should partake or not in religious activities in school.

In March, the Charge d’Affaires met with Archbishop Ghaleb Bader, the Apostolic Nuncio to the country, to discuss the Church’s relationship with the new administration and any perceived societal or governmental challenges for Catholics to freely exercise their religion. In August, the Charge d’Affaires met with Father Jose Joaquin Dominguez, the Catholic liaison to the Executive Power, and in September, he met with the Protestant liaison, Pastor Dioris (Dio) Astacio. These meetings provided an opportunity to strengthen relationships with the two main religious liaisons to the Executive Power. The Charge d’Affaires discussed the ability to choose whether to associate with a religion or not, and the ability to freely exercise one’s religion.

The embassy continued to support Holocaust remembrance and education initiatives through grants to the Sosua Jewish Museum and to two U.S. institutions to support the museum’s efforts to preserve and digitalize museum archives that told the story of Jewish refugees who immigrated to the country after fleeing Nazi persecution. In August, the Charge d’Affaires met with the board of the museum and representatives from the adjacent synagogue and toured the exhibitions. The embassy publicized the visit on its social media pages.

Throughout the year, embassy officials met with leaders representing different religious groups, including representatives from the Interfaith Dialogue Table, the Dominican Christian Alliance, evangelical Protestant groups, and the Church of Jesus Christ, to discuss religious freedom and the challenges non-Catholic groups faced in the country. Embassy officials also engaged non-Catholic leaders to discuss the draft law in Congress that would remove the requirement that non-Catholic religious entities register as NGOs and provide greater funding for these groups.