

THE BAHAMAS 2021 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. Some members of the Rastafarian community continued to state the government violated their constitutional right to religious freedom by prohibiting the legal use of marijuana in ceremonial rituals and detaining community members for using it. The previous government had advanced, but not passed, legislation to permit limited use of marijuana, including for religious purposes. The new administration of Prime Minister Philip Davis had not stated by year's end whether it would reintroduce this or a similar bill. In October the government began reviewing expungement applications from individuals convicted of possession. The government engaged the Bahamas Christian Council (BCC), comprised of religious leaders from Christian denominations, to discuss societal, political, and economic issues.

Some private entities required employees to either be vaccinated against COVID-19, which Rastafarians said they viewed as a violation of their religious beliefs, or pay for their own weekly tests.

U.S. embassy representatives met regularly with officials from the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote tolerance and respect for religious diversity. Embassy representatives also met with the BCC president and representatives of the Muslim, Rastafarian, and Jewish communities to promote societal tolerance for religious diversity and inquire about the effects of government policies, including COVID-19 restrictions, on religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 352,000 (midyear 2021). According to the most recent census in 2010, more than 90 percent of the population practices a religion. Of those, Protestants make up 70 percent of the population – Baptists, 35 percent; Anglicans, 14 percent; Pentecostals, 9 percent; Seventh-day Adventists, 4 percent; Methodists, 4 percent; Church of God, 2 percent; and Brethren, 2 percent. Twelve percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Other Christians are 13 percent of the population, 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, which is practiced by a small number of citizens and some resident Haitians. According to a leader of the Rastafarian community, there are more than 13,000 Rastafarians in the country. The leader of the Jewish community estimates there are 1,000 Jews.

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 his or her 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. 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. The publication and sale of any book, writing, or representation deemed blasphemous is punishable by up to two years in prison, but opinions on religious issues "expressed in good faith and in decent language" are not subject to prosecution under the law. The government typically does not enforce this law.

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 profit-making 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 that the group maintains 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 with the Department of Immigration and apply for exemptions on a case-by-case basis.

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. The government permits home schooling and regulates it under the Ministry of Education.

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

Government Practices

The practice of Obeah remained illegal, but reports of violations were infrequent, as Obeah was generally practiced in private on remote islands with no discernable organizing body. The Royal Bahamas Police Force, however, stated it investigated credible reports of its practice.

Some Rastafarians continued to state the government violated their constitutional right to religious freedom by prohibiting the legal use of marijuana in ceremonial rituals. Rastafarians said police continued to arrest them for possessing small quantities of marijuana used in ceremonial rituals. In August, the previous government received the final report of The Bahamas National Commission on Marijuana, a preliminary version of which recommended allowing medicinal and religious use, and it had advanced legislation to that end. It was unclear at year's end if the new administration of Prime Minister Davis would pursue the same or similar legislation. In October, the government began reviewing expungement applications from individuals convicted of possession.

The Rastafarian community voiced concerns about possible mandatory COVID-19 vaccination requirements. A Rastafarian leader said leaders of his community submitted a request to government officials in July to allow community members a religious exemption when accessing private institutions that required COVID-19 vaccinations. He said the government did not respond to their request for a religious exemption by year's end.

The leader of the Jewish community, Rabbi Sholom Bluming, expressed appreciation that the government allowed the Jewish community to utilize government-run networks to donate food to families throughout the country.

The government continued to include Christian prayer in significant official events. Government officials and members of parliament normally quoted 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

Some private entities required employees to either be vaccinated against COVID-19, which Rastafarians said they viewed as a violation of their religious beliefs, or pay for their own weekly tests. Rastafarian leaders said those entities discriminated against employees who did not comply.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives met regularly with government officials from the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Discussions included promoting inclusive communities with a respect for human rights and religious diversity in the country.

Embassy officials met with representatives from the Muslim, Rastafarian, and Jewish communities, and with civil society leaders to discuss religious freedom, including the importance of governmental and societal tolerance for religious diversity.