

BAHAMAS 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states that freedom of religion is a fundamental right, with individuals having the right to practice freely the religion of their choice or to practice no religion at all. The law prohibits discrimination based on religion. 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, this law is traditionally unenforced. The government continued to include Christian prayer in all significant events. The government met 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 regularly met with members of religious groups to discuss issues of religious freedom and maintain relationships.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 330,000 (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2010 census, more than 90 percent of the population professes a religion. Of those, 72 percent are Protestant, 14 percent Roman Catholic, and 4 percent other. Among Protestants, Baptists account for 35 percent, Anglicans/Episcopalians 15 percent, Pentecostals 8 percent, Church of God 5 percent, Seventh-day Adventists 5 percent, and Methodists 4 percent. Other religious groups include Greek Orthodox Christians, Jews, Bahais, Jehovah's Witnesses, Rastafarians, Muslims, Black Hebrew Israelites, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Hindus, and Obeah, which is similar to Voodoo and practiced by a small number of citizens and resident Haitians, primarily living in the Family Islands.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the right to worship and 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 is illegal; those caught practicing it or attempting to intimidate, steal, inflict disease, or restore a person to health through the practice of Obeah may face a sentence of three months in prison. This law is traditionally unenforced. There were no prosecutions during the year.

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. Incorporation requires religious groups to 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.

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 that 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. In government schools, students may not opt out of religious education, a core part of final examinations.

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

Government Practices

The government continued to include Christian prayer in all significant events. It was common for government officials and members of parliament to quote religious teachings during speeches, and senior government officials occasionally addressed assemblies during formal religious services.

The government met regularly with the Bahamas Christian Council (BCC), comprising religious leaders from the wide spectrum of Christian denominations, to discuss societal, political, and economic issues.

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 maintained contacts with a wide variety of religious groups, including the BCC and smaller groups such as the Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, Bahai, Mennonite, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Rastafarian communities.