

BAHAMAS 2015 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 practice no religion at all. Discrimination based on religion is prohibited. Christian prayer accompanies government events. Rastafarian leaders reported incidences of police profiling because of their religious belief in using marijuana, which is illegal. Rastafarians continue to advocate for religious accommodation in prison regarding their diet and to oppose having their dreadlocks cut in government detention. Practice of the Obeah religion was illegal and, although the government did not make any arrests, violators could be sentenced to three months in prison.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy representatives met with members of the Bahamas Christian Council to discuss issues of religious freedom and to maintain ongoing relationships with leaders of numerous religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 325,000 (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2010 census, more than 90 percent of the population professes a religion. Protestants make up 72 percent of the population and include Baptists (35 percent of the population), Anglicans/Episcopalians (15 percent), Pentecostals (8 percent), Church of God (5 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (5 percent), and Methodists (4 percent). Roman Catholics make up 14 percent of the population.

Smaller religious communities include Greek Orthodox Christians, Jews, Bahais, Jehovah's Witnesses, Rastafarians, Muslims, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). A small number of Bahamians and resident Haitians, particularly those living in the Family Islands, practice Obeah, which is similar to Voodoo. Some members of the small resident Guyanese and Indian populations practice Hinduism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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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 purpose of protecting the rights and freedoms of others. This includes a prohibition on marijuana, which holds religious significance for the Rastafarian community. 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, and those caught practicing it or attempting to intimidate, steal, inflict disease, or restore a person to health through the practice of Obeah may be sentenced to three months in prison.

The publication and sale of any blasphemous book, writing, or representation 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.

Religious groups are not required to register, although 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 for-profit companies if they incorporate.

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 schools.

Government Practices

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Rastafarian leaders reported their members continued to experience police profiling and targeting due to their belief in the religious use of marijuana. They also expressed concern that prison officials cut the dreadlocks of Rastafarian detainees held in short-term custody, and that prisoners at Bahamas Correctional Services were not regularly provided with meals that met their religious dietary requirements.

There were no arrests related to violations of the law against practicing Obeah. The law prohibiting blasphemy was not enforced.

The government included 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 an assembly during a formal religious service.

The government met regularly, both publicly and privately, with the Bahamas Christian Council (BCC), composed of 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

Embassy representatives maintained contacts with a wide variety of religious groups, especially with smaller groups such as the Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, Bahai, Mennonite, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Rastafarian communities, to ensure the embassy was aware of any potential concerns of those groups.