

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and belief. A concordat with the Holy See designates Catholicism as the official state religion and extends to the Catholic Church special privileges not granted to other religious groups. Non-Catholic religious groups may register as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with the Attorney General's Office and the Ministry of Finance for tax purposes. Non-Catholic groups continued to state they received less government funding than Catholic groups, such as for administrative expenses and construction. In June the Catholic Church transferred 127 parochial schools to the Ministry of Education, which agreed to finance them while allowing the schools to continue to provide instruction in Catholicism. In October the Ministry of Education agreed to assume financial responsibility for 134 private evangelical Protestant schools, allowing those schools to continue to offer evangelical Protestant religious instruction. Some religious groups said they continued to have difficulty acquiring customs duty exemptions or waivers from the Ministry of Finance. Non-Catholic missionaries and religious leaders said they still could not obtain visas under the same immigration category as Catholic religious leaders, which non-Catholic groups said made it more expensive and difficult to bring missionaries to the country. At the opening of the Caribbean Symposium on Religious Liberty in November, Vice President Margarita Cedenó stressed the centrality of legal systems to recognize and guarantee religious freedom.

In November the Pontifical University in Santo Domingo cohosted with the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation, Religions for Peace, and Brigham Young University the Caribbean Symposium on Religious Liberty. Participants emphasized the connection between religious freedom and sustainable development and the positive role that business leaders play in advancing interfaith understanding.

U.S. embassy officials maintained ties with religious representatives and faith groups, meeting with leaders from the Catholic Church; the United Dominican Council for Evangelicals, representing the Protestant community; the Jewish community; and the Muslim community to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. Issues discussed included the concordat, government financial support of churches, customs duties, and the freedom to proselytize.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.7 million (July 2017 estimate). According to a 2015 Latinobarometer survey, the population is 57 percent Catholic and 25 percent evangelical Protestant, while 13 percent have no declared religion. Groups together composing 5 percent of the population include Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), nonevangelical Protestants, atheists, and others.

There are approximately 2,500 to 3,000 Muslims, located across the country. Most of the approximately 350 members of the Jewish community live in Santo Domingo, with a small community in Sosua. There are small numbers of Buddhists, Hindus, and Bahais.

Most Haitian immigrants are Catholic. The Dominican National Statistics Office estimated in 2012 there were 458,000 Haitian immigrants in the country; however, government officials estimate the number could be as high as 1.2 million. An unknown number practice Voodoo or other African 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 the 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.

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, which applies to nonprofit organizations generally and is not specifically for religious groups, is a two-step process. First, 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. Second, the organization must draft and submit statutes

and provide copies of government-issued identification documents for the board of directors. After registering, religious groups may request customs duty exemption status from the Ministry of Finance.

The law provides for government recognition of marriages performed by religious groups registered with the Central Electoral Board. The law requires churches to have legal status and presence in the country for at least five years, to provide a membership list, and to train pastors on how to perform marriages. Churches are responsible for determining the legal qualification of couples, and they must record all marriages performed and make those lists available for government inspection. Failure to comply with the regulations governing marriage can result in misdemeanor sanctions or fines.

The concordat grants the Catholic Church free access to prisons. The government states it allows access to all faiths in prisons. All faiths have the right to perform religious acts, in community or alone, in prisons.

As part of the concordat with the Vatican, the law requires religious studies based on Catholic Church teachings in all public schools. The concordat accords the Catholic Church the right to revise and approve textbooks used in public schools throughout the country. The concordat also provides parents with the option of exempting their children from religious studies in public schools at both the elementary and secondary levels. Private schools are exempt from the religious studies requirement; however, private schools run by religious groups may teach religious studies according to their beliefs.

The government imposes no immigration restrictions or quotas on religious workers. Foreign missionaries may obtain a one-year multi-entry business visa through the Ministry of Foreign Relations after submitting a completed application form, original passport, two passport-sized photographs, and a document offering proof as to the business activity from the institution or person in the country with whom the missionary is affiliated. Foreign missionaries may renew the 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 that was unavailable to them,

including properties transferred to the Catholic Church, as well as subsidies to the salaries of Catholic Church officials.

In June the Catholic Church transferred 127 parochial schools to the Ministry of Education. The government agreed to finance the schools while allowing the schools to continue to provide Catholic instruction. In October the Ministry of Education also agreed to assume responsibility for 134 private evangelical Protestant schools, while also allowing those schools to continue to offer the same religious instruction in accordance with evangelical Protestant teachings. The transfer of the schools, which was voluntary, resulted from a 2014 presidential promise to spend 4 percent of the country's gross domestic product on education.

A non-Catholic organization said the government required them to pay customs duties on imported food and other items and then apply for a refund instead of receiving an exemption as allowed by the law. Religious groups reported difficulties when applying for and receiving customs duty refunds from the Ministry of Finance.

At the opening of the Caribbean Symposium on Religious Liberty in November, Vice President Cedenó stressed the centrality of legal systems to recognize and guarantee religious freedom. She also emphasized the need for societies to develop cultures of mutual respect and to foster interfaith collaboration between the public and private sectors, so that the shared value of religious freedom can confront the looming challenge of social inequality.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Pontifical University in Santo Domingo cohosted with the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation, Religions for Peace, and Brigham Young University the Caribbean Symposium on Religious Liberty. Delegates from 14 Caribbean countries participated in the event, which emphasized the connection between religious freedom and sustainable development and the positive role business leaders play in advancing interfaith understanding and peace.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials maintained ties with religious representatives and faith groups, meeting with leaders from the Catholic Church; the United Dominican Council for Evangelicals, representing the Protestant community; officials from the Jewish community; and leaders from the Muslim community. In these meetings, embassy

officials and religious leaders discussed the concordat, government financial support of churches, customs duties, and the freedom to proselytize.