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Dominican Republic

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country, which occupies two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, has an area of 18,815 square miles and a population of 9.8 million. The largest religious group is the Roman Catholic Church. Traditional Protestants, evangelical Christian groups (particularly Assemblies of God, Church of God, Baptists, and Pentecostals), Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) have a much smaller but generally growing presence. According to a 2006 population survey by the Gallup Organization, the population was 39.8 percent Catholic (practicing), 29.1 percent Catholic (nonpracticing), and 18.2 percent evangelical Protestant. In the same study, 10.6 percent stated they had no religion. The Dominican Confederation of Evangelical Unity claimed evangelicals represented 16 to 20 percent of the population.

There are approximately 300 Jews. Most live in Santo Domingo, which has two synagogues and one rabbi. There is a synagogue for the small Jewish community in Sosua, which is led by a community leader, but there is no ordained rabbi. Leaders of the Muslim community indicated that the number of Muslims declined to approximately 700 to 800 due to a decreased number of foreign students. There is a small number of Buddhists and Hindus. Some Catholics practiced a combination of Catholicism and Afro-Caribbean beliefs (santería), witchcraft (brujería), or voodoo (vodou), but because these practices were usually concealed, the number of adherents was unknown.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The new constitution, promulgated on January 26, 2010, extends to other religious groups the right to celebrate religious marriages and provides them all civil rights in accordance with the law. This status previously had been an exclusive privilege of the Catholic Church.

While the constitution specifies that there is no state church and provides for freedom of religion and belief, the government signed a concordat in 1954 with the Vatican, which designated Catholicism as the official religion and extended special privileges to the Catholic Church not granted to other religious groups. These included the legal recognition of church law; use of public funds to underwrite some church expenses, such as rehabilitation of church facilities; and a complete exoneration from customs duties. In 2008 the government informed the Catholic Church that it would assume most of the cost of building a new cathedral and religious sanctuary complex in Bayaguana, but after obtaining the site, it suspended construction due to lack of funds.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Our Lady of Altigracia Day, Good Friday, Corpus Christi, Our Lady of Mercedes Day, and Christmas.

Religious groups are required to register with the government. Religious groups other than the Catholic Church may request exoneration from customs duties from the Office of the Presidency. The process can be lengthy; however, no requests for customs exoneration were denied during the reporting period.

The law requires that the Bible be read in public schools, but it was not enforced. Private schools are exempt from this requirement.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Representatives of the U.S. embassy met with leaders of various religious communities, including those of minority groups.

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