



Bahamas

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

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

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 13,939 square miles and a population of 340,000, including those residing illegally. The country is ethnically diverse and includes a Haitian minority of legal and illegal immigrants estimated at 40,000 to 60,000 persons and a white/European minority that is nearly as large.

More than 90 percent of the population professed a religion, and anecdotal evidence suggests that most attend services regularly. The country's religious profile reflects its diversity. Protestant Christian denominations including Baptists (35 percent), Anglicans (15 percent), Pentecostals (8 percent), Church of God (5 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (5 percent) and Methodists (4 percent) are in the majority, but there are also significant Roman Catholic (14 percent) and Greek Orthodox populations. Smaller Jewish, Baha'i, Jehovah's Witness and Muslim communities also are active. A small number of Bahamians and Haitians, particularly those living in the Family Islands, practice Obeah, a version of voodoo. A small but stable number of citizens identify themselves as Rastafarians, while some members of the small resident Guyanese and Indian populations practice Hinduism and other South Asian religions. Although many unaffiliated Protestant congregations are almost exclusively black, most mainstream churches are integrated racially.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Constitution specifically forbids infringement of a person's freedom to choose and change his or her religion and guarantees the right to practice the religion of one's choice. The law provides effective remedies to enforce these rights.

Christianity is the dominant religion. Political and public discourse often refer to the country's strong Christian heritage and Christian themes in general, and the Constitution requires the Government to guarantee respect for Christian values. Religious groups are free to train their clergy.

Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Whit Monday are national holidays. The Government meets regularly with religious leaders, both publicly and privately, to discuss social, political, and economic issues.

Churches and other religious congregations do not face any special registration requirements, although they must

incorporate legally to purchase land. There are no legal provisions to encourage or discourage the formation of religious communities, which are required to pay the same tariffs and stamp taxes as for-profit companies if they legally incorporate.

Religion is recognized as an academic subject at government schools, and it is included in mandatory standardized achievement and certificate tests for all students. The country's Christian heritage has a heavy influence on religion classes in government-supported schools, which focus on the study of Christian philosophy, Biblical texts, and, to a lesser extent, comparative and non-Christian religions presented in a Christian context. The Constitution allows students, or their guardians in the case of minors, to decline to participate in religious education and observance in schools; this right, although rarely exercised, was respected in practice.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government permits foreign clergy and missionaries to enter the country, proselytize, and practice their religion without restriction.

Haitian immigrants brought with them elements of voodoo. The practice of Obeah is illegal, and those caught practicing it or attempting to intimidate, steal, inflict disease, or restore a person to health under the guise of Obeah are liable to 3 months' imprisonment.

Some Rastafarians claimed discrimination by the Government, citing obligatory haircuts, police harassment, and unequal treatment of Rastafarian students. Rastafarians met with government officials during the reporting period to discuss their concerns and cited progress in their discussions.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

Several interdenominational organizations and ecumenical movements were active that freely expressed their opinions on social, political, and economic issues. Christian pastors exerted significant influence over politics and society.

Society was at times less tolerant of religions perceived as foreign, particularly Rastafarianism, Obeah, and voodoo. Some citizens publicly called the poverty and political unrest in Haiti signs of God's disapproval of the practice of voodoo. However, there were no related reports of harassment or violence against persons or property.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

Released on September 14, 2007

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