U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
DIPLOMACY IN ACTION

Bahamas

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

October 26, 2009

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 has an area of 13,939 square miles and a population of 342,400, including those residing illegally. The country is ethnically diverse and includes a Haitian minority of legal and illegal immigrants estimated at 30,000 to 60,000 persons and a white/European minority of comparable size.

More than 90 percent of the population professes 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 Witnesses, 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 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 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 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 refers to the country's strong Christian heritage and Christian themes in general, and the Constitution requires the Government to guarantee respect for Christian values.

The Government observes Good Friday, Easter Monday, Whit Monday, and Christmas Day as 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 is included in mandatory standardized achievement and certificate tests. 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

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.

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 three months of imprisonment.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners 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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

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.

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

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.