

BAHAMAS 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution, other laws, and domestic policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

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

Although the U.S. embassy received no major religious freedom complaints, embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government. Embassy officials also attended special religious services at the invitation of the government and religious groups. The embassy maintained relationships with religious leaders, civil society members, and government officials in an effort to promote religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the official census of 2010, the total population is approximately 353,700. The census also reported that more than 90 percent of the population professes a religion. Protestant Christian denominations make up a majority and include Baptists (35 percent), Anglicans/Episcopalians (15 percent), Pentecostals (8 percent), Church of God (5 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (5 percent), and Methodists (4 percent). Fourteen percent of the population is Roman Catholic.

Smaller religious communities are also active and 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, a version of Voodoo. Some members of the small resident Guyanese and Indian populations practice Hinduism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. Section 489 of the Penal Code (Publication or Sale of Blasphemous or Obscene Libel) prohibits publication and sale of any obscene or blasphemous book, writing, or representation. This offense is punishable by imprisonment for two years; however, this law is not strictly enforced.

The constitution specifically forbids infringement of a person's freedom to choose and change his or her religion and provides for 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 respect Christian values. The government meets regularly, both publicly and privately, with The Bahamas Christian Council (BCC), which is composed of religious leaders from the major Christian denominations, to discuss societal, political, and economic issues.

Churches and other religious congregations have no 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 strong 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. The constitution allows students, or their guardians in the case of minors, to decline to participate in religious education and observance in schools. Authorities respect this right, although citizens rarely exercise it.

The practice of Obeah (and Voodoo) 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 may be sentenced to three months in prison.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, Whit Monday, and Christmas.

Government Practices

Other than alleged discrimination against Rastafarians, there were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Rastafarians alleged prison officials were responsible for ongoing discrimination against detainees at Fox Hill Prison. Specifically, they reported that prison officials cut the dreadlocks of Rastafarians held in custody for possession of small amounts of marijuana. Under the law persons convicted for possession of as little as one marijuana cigarette face a maximum sentence of four years in prison. The government defended the practice of cutting Rastafarians' dreadlocks as standard procedure for hygienic reasons; Rastafarians contended it was in fact based on discrimination rather than hygiene. Rastafarians also reported Fox Hill Prison failed to meet their religious dietary requirements. On November 19, The House of Rastafari, a Rastafarian group, declared its intention to appeal to the judiciary about these practices. On December 10, Human Rights Day, several Rastafarians held a peaceful demonstration in the inner city to highlight acts of police harassment and brutality and the cutting of Rastafarians' dreadlocks.

There were no arrests related to violations of the law against practicing Obeah (and Voodoo) during the year.

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 societal, political, and economic issues throughout the year. Christian clergy exerted significant influence over politics and society.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officers regularly discussed religious freedom issues with both government and civil society representatives. Embassy representatives frequently attended religious celebrations and events, including the BCC-organized National Day of Prayer.