

BAHAMAS 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including individuals' right to practice the religion of their choice. It prohibits discrimination based on religion. Christian prayer accompanies government events. Rastafarian leaders expressed concern that some members experienced police profiling and did not receive religious accommodation in prison. Practice of the Obeah or Voodoo religions was illegal and, although the government did not make any arrests, violators could be sentenced to three months in prison.

Christian denominations exerted significant influence over politics and society, but other groups also expressed viewpoints on a wide variety of concerns. Religious groups regularly expressed their views through the media.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed issues of religious freedom with government officials and maintained ongoing relationships with leaders of numerous religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 321,834 (July 2014 estimate). According to the 2010 census, more than 90 percent of the population professes a religion. Protestant denominations make up 72 percent of the population 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). Roman Catholics make up 14 percent of the population.

Smaller religious communities 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, which is similar to Voodoo. Some members of the small resident Guyanese and Indian populations practice Hinduism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

BAHAMAS

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the right to worship and to practice one's religion. It forbids infringement of individuals' freedom to choose or change their religion and prohibits discrimination based on belief. Parliament may limit religious practices in the interest of defense, public safety, health, public order, or for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedoms of others. The constitution refers to "an abiding respect for Christian values" in its preamble; however, there is no state-established religious body or official religion.

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 through the practice of Obeah, may be sentenced to three months in prison.

Publication and sale of any blasphemous book, writing, or representation is punishable by up to two years in prison; however, the law states that opinions on religious issues "expressed in good faith and in decent language" are not subject to prosecution under the law.

Religious groups do not have 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 have the same taxation requirements 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. Religion classes in government-supported schools focus on the study of Christian philosophy, biblical texts, and, to a lesser extent, comparative and non-Christian religions. Religious groups may establish private schools. The constitution states that no one shall be compelled to participate in religious instruction or observances of a religion other than his or her own. It allows students, or their guardians in the case of minors, to decline to participate in religious education and observance in schools.

Government Practices

Christian prayer accompanied all significant government events. It was commonplace for government officials and members of parliament to quote

BAHAMAS

religious teachings during speeches, and senior government officials occasionally addressed an assembly during a formal religious service.

The government met 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.

Rastafarian leaders stated their members continued to experience police profiling and targeting due to their belief in the religious use of marijuana. They also expressed concern that prison officials cut the dreadlocks of Rastafarian detainees held in short-term custody, and that prisoners at Bahamas Correctional Services were not regularly provided with meals that met their religious dietary requirements.

There were no arrests related to violations of the law against practicing Obeah or Voodoo. The law prohibiting blasphemy was not enforced.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Christian prayer opened most public events. Various religious leaders regularly expressed their opinions on societal, political, and economic issues, both in formal assemblies and in the media. There were no restrictions on religious groups' access to media space, although editorials appeared proportionally to religious demographics, with the majority of contributions from Protestant leaders; small groups rarely contributed.

Religious leaders stated Christian clergy exerted significant influence over politics, social policy, and public opinion. The BCC actively criticized the government for proceeding to pass gaming legislation despite the government's campaign against a 2013 referendum in which voters rejected legalizing gambling. The group also joined with other organizations to influence the government's decision to revise the text of a proposed gender equality referendum.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers met with government officials to discuss religious freedom issues such as the concerns expressed by the Rastafarian community and the government's relationship with the BCC. Embassy representatives maintained contacts throughout the religious community, especially with smaller groups such

BAHAMAS

as the Jewish, Mormon, and Rastafarian populations, to ensure the embassy was aware of any potential concerns of those groups. Specifically, embassy officials solicited input from these groups regarding political or societal issues the groups felt might affect their congregations, and any collective efforts to support or oppose proposed legislation.