

JAMAICA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom to worship and to change religion. It prohibits discrimination based on belief. Rastafarians expressed concerns about the government's prohibition of their use of marijuana for religious purposes. They stated they experienced additional scrutiny from law enforcement officials.

Rastafarians stated that elements of their religious observance resulted in barriers to employment and professional advancement. Local media outlets provided a forum for religious debate.

The U.S. embassy engaged in dialogue with religious groups, including Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Rastafarians, as part of its overall efforts to promote religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.9 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the 2011 census, an estimated 26 percent of the population belongs to various branches of the Church of God, 12 percent is Seventh-day Adventist, 11 percent Pentecostal, 7 percent Baptist, 3 percent Anglican, 2 percent Roman Catholic, 2 percent United Church, 2 percent Methodist, 2 percent Jehovah's Witnesses, 1 percent Moravian, and 1 percent Brethren. Two percent declined to answer questions about religious affiliation. Other religious groups constitute 8 percent of the population, including approximately 29,000 Rastafarians, 1,500 Muslims (Muslim groups estimate their numbers at 5,000), 1,800 Hindus, 500 Jews, and 270 Bahais. The census reports 21 percent has no religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of thought and religion, including the freedom to change one's religion or belief and the freedom, either alone or in community with others, both in public and in private, to manifest and propagate one's religion or belief in worship. It prohibits discrimination based on belief.

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Parliament, if petitioned, may act to recognize a religious group. Groups may also register with the government. Registration is not mandatory; however, registered religious groups may receive tax-exempt status and other privileges, such as the right of their clergy to visit members in prison. Religious organizations wanting to engage in tax-exempt, property and business transactions must first register as charities. To be considered a charity, organizations, including religious groups, have to apply to the Cooperatives and Friendly Societies Department at the Ministry of Investment and Commerce. Once registered, groups may take their registration to customs or apply to the Commissioner of Tax Administration to be considered for tax free status.

The constitution states that religious groups have the right to provide religious instruction to members of their communities. No individual may be required to receive religious instruction or participate in religious observances contrary to his or her beliefs. The public school curriculum includes nondenominational religious education, which focuses on the historical role of religion in society and philosophical thought. A number of private schools are operated by churches and a number of public institutions have affiliations to churches. Some public schools also are run by churches but get some funding from the government and are required to abide by the rules of the Ministry of Education. Religious schools are not subject to any special restrictions and do not receive special treatment from the government. Most religious schools are affiliated with either the Catholic Church or Protestant denominations; there are at least two schools run by the Islamic Council of Jamaica and at least one Jewish school.

The government has a long-standing ban on the use of marijuana, including for religious purposes.

Government Practices

Rastafarians expressed concern that the government prohibited the use of marijuana, and they informally lobbied to change the law. In September the cabinet approved a plan to decriminalize the possession of small amounts of marijuana, including for religious purposes. In June the minister of justice gave a speech in which he discussed the idea of decriminalization within the context of national and international law and social attitudes, saying there were many aspects to consider, one of which was religious practice. He stated that some advocates of decriminalization had based their position on constitutional protections of freedom

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of religion, but did not state his own opinion on the subject. Parliament did not act on the proposal before the end of the year.

Rastafarians also stated that law enforcement officials unfairly targeted them for religious reasons; however, law enforcement officials stated they were enforcing existing laws governing the use of marijuana.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Rastafarians stated that elements of their religious observance, such as wearing dreadlocks and smoking marijuana, presented serious barriers to their ability to find employment and achieve professional status. While some Rastafarians stated they had also experienced other forms of societal discrimination, others said such discrimination had diminished considerably in recent years, especially as Rastafarian styles in clothing and music gained wider acceptance.

Local media outlets continued to provide a forum for extensive, open coverage and debate on religious matters. Muslim and Jewish groups reported society was tolerant of religious diversity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy engaged with and encouraged dialogue among religious groups, including Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Rastafarians, as part of its overall efforts to promote religious freedom. The Chargé d’Affaires and other embassy officers included references to religious freedom and tolerance in speeches and other official communications.