

BAHAMAS

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

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

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The embassy maintains relationships with religious leaders, civil society members, and members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in an effort to promote religious freedom and human rights. In honor of Ramadan, embassy representatives visited the country's only mosque to meet with the leaders of the community, discuss their concerns, and explore potential engagement opportunities in the coming year.

Section I. Religious Demography

More than 90 percent of the population professes a religion. 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; there are also significant Roman Catholic (14 percent) and Greek Orthodox populations. The local Greek Orthodox Church estimates that there are approximately 500 practicing Orthodox Christians on New Providence Island.

Smaller Jewish, Baha'i Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, Rastafarian, 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. 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 and Greek Orthodox and Jewish religious groups are almost exclusively white, most mainstream churches are integrated racially.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

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 with religious leaders, both publicly and privately, 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 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.

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

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Rastafarians reported discrimination against detainees by prison officials at Fox Hill Prison. Specifically, they reported prison officials cut the dreadlocks of

Rastafarians held on remand for possession of small amounts of marijuana. The government maintained the practice was standard procedure engaged in for hygienic reasons. Citing an incident where prison officials allegedly shaved half of a Rastafarian's head and left dreads intact on the other, Rastafarians asserted that the prison officials' motivation for cutting dreads was based on discrimination rather than hygiene. Rastafarians also reported that the prison failed to meet the religious dietary preferences of Rastafarian detainees at Fox Hill Prison by only offering meat dishes.

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 may be sentenced to three months of imprisonment.

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 pastors exerted significant influence over politics and society.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy maintains relationships with religious leaders, civil society members, and members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in an effort to promote religious freedom and human rights.