

BAHAMAS 2013 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.

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

U.S. 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 to promote religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 319,000 (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2010 census, 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). 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, 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 generally protect religious freedom. An unenforced law prohibits publication and sale of any blasphemous book, writing, or representation.

BAHAMAS

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.

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.

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. The constitution allows students, or their guardians in the case of minors, to decline to participate in religious education and observance in schools. 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.

Government Practices

On May 3, several Rastafarian leaders met with the Constitutional Commission (a government-appointed panel that makes recommendations for revisions to the constitution) to lobby for full legal recognition of their faith. One of these leaders, Henry Blyden, stated that police profiled and targeted Rastafarians due to their belief in the religious use of marijuana. Blyden called on the commission to end ongoing discrimination against Rastafarian detainees at Fox Hill Prison. He also asked the commission to stop prison officials from cutting the dreadlocks of Rastafarians held in short-term custody for minor offenses and to provide Rastafarians a diet in prison that meets their religious dietary requirements. The Constitutional Commission recommended that Rastafarians take up their issues with the judiciary.

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

BAHAMAS

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 regularly expressed their opinions on societal, political, and economic issues throughout the year. Christian clergy exerted notable influence over politics and society. For example, The Bahamas Christian Council was instrumental in leading a campaign against legalizing gambling and urged member congregations and the community to vote “no” in a national referendum held on January 29. The media attributed the defeat of the referendum to the Christian Council’s campaign.

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.