

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government recognized the first non-Roman Catholic marriage since passage of legislation in 2011 that recognized marriage ceremonies conducted by non-Catholic religious groups.

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

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with government officials as well as religious and cultural groups to promote tolerance and religious diversity. In August the Charge d'Affaires hosted an iftar dinner for the Muslim community.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.2 million (July 2013 estimate). The population is 69 percent Catholic, 18 percent evangelical Protestant, including Assemblies of God, Church of God, Baptists, and Pentecostals, and 11 percent without religious affiliation, according to a 2006 Gallup survey, the most recent study available. There are also small numbers of Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). According to an evangelical group, evangelicals represent 25 percent of the population.

Most of the approximately 250 Jews live in Santo Domingo, while a small Jewish community resides in Sosua. There are approximately 500 Muslims, of whom approximately 400 are noncitizens, most of them students. There are a small number of Buddhists and Hindus. Some Catholics combine Catholicism and Afro-Caribbean beliefs such as Santeria, witchcraft, or Voodoo (voodoo).

Most Haitian immigrants are Catholic. An unknown number practice voodoo.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

The constitution specifies there is no established church and provides for freedom of religion and belief. A concordat with the Vatican, however, designates Catholicism as the official religion and extends special privileges to the Catholic Church not granted to other religious groups. These include the legal recognition of church law, use of public funds to underwrite some church expenses, and exclusion from customs duties.

Non-Catholic religious groups must first register as a nongovernmental organization and later with the Ministry of Finance and the Directorate General of Customs. Registration requires completing a two-step process: first, the organization must register with the Attorney General's office by providing documentation of a fixed address and the names of seven elected officers, have a minimum of 25 members, and pay a fee. Second, the organization must draft and submit statutes and provide copies of government-issued identification documents for the board of directors. Religious groups other than the Catholic Church may request exclusion from customs duties from the Ministry of Finance.

The law provides for government recognition of marriages performed by all religious groups on condition they otherwise comply with related regulations. The 2010 constitution states religious marriages have civil effects in terms established by law, subject to the provisions of international treaties. A law extending civil recognition to non-Catholic religious marriages was passed in 2011. It authorizes clergy of churches that have been established in the country for at least five years to perform state-recognized marriages on condition they complete training administered by the Central Electoral Board (JCE) and requires churches submit to the JCE a listing of individuals who have received authorization.

The law requires Bible reading in public schools, but the government does not normally enforce this law. Private schools are exempt from this requirement.

Government Practices

The Dominican Society of Jehovah's Witnesses conducted the first non-Catholic marriage performed by a religious group and recognized by the state at the JCE

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headquarters August 28. The JCE reported training 443 representatives from 56 congregations to preside over non-Catholic unions. Forty-six pastors from four religious groups, the Dominican Society of Jehovah's Witnesses, the Christian Church, the World of Life Christian Church, and the Church of God, completed the accreditation requirements and received authorization to preside over state-recognized marriages.

Religious groups other than the Catholic Church submitted applications for exclusion from customs duties to the Ministry of Finance, which stated it would make its best effort to review applications in no more than 15 days; however, the process sometimes took three months. The Ministry of Finance reported that from January to September it approved 178 applications from evangelical Protestant churches.

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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers discussed religious freedom with the government, as well as with religious and cultural groups, to underscore the linkage between religious freedom and democracy and human rights. In August the Charge d'Affaires hosted the embassy's fourth annual iftar for leaders of the Muslim community. The attendees included the imam and chief administrator of the principal mosque, and other representatives of the Muslim community.