

JAMAICA 2015 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. The government put into effect a law that, among other articles, permits adherents of the Rastafarian faith to use marijuana for sacramental purposes in registered places of Rastafarian worship. Rastafarian representatives stated that this helped assuage Rastafarian concerns about the government's past prohibition of the use of marijuana for religious purposes.

Rastafarians stated that acceptance of their views and practices have improved markedly, although cases of discrimination against those seeking employment and professional advancement continued to occur. Legal recourse was available and was exercised for victims of discrimination. Local media outlets provided a forum for religious debate.

The U.S. embassy engaged in dialogue with the government as well as 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 3 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 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 Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) indicated approximately 5,900 members resided on the island. The census reports 21 percent have no religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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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.

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, need to apply to the Cooperatives and Friendly Societies Department at the Ministry of Industry, Investment, and Commerce. Once registered, groups may take their registration to the Department of Customs or apply to the 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. Students cannot opt out of religious education; however, religious devotion or practice is optional. A number of private schools are operated by churches and a number of public institutions have church affiliations. Some public schools also are run by churches but receive 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.

Government Practices

In February both houses of parliament passed a law which ended the government's longstanding criminalization of marijuana, including for religious purposes, and the law went into effect in April. Among other stipulations, the law permits adherents of the Rastafarian faith to use marijuana for sacramental purposes in locations registered as places of Rastafarian worship.

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Rastafarians stated that the passage and attendant enforcement of the law that legalized marijuana usage for religious purposes assuaged their concerns about the government's longstanding ban on the use of marijuana for religious purposes. Rastafarians stated that law enforcement officials adopted appropriate changes in applying and enforcing the new law, but in rare cases continued to profile and stop and search for possession of marijuana over the decriminalized limit.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some Rastafarians stated they had had their hair cut by police or prison officials, and several were exercising legal recourse measures.

Rastafarians stated that elements of their religious observance, such as wearing dreadlocks and smoking marijuana, still presented some barriers to their ability to find employment and achieve professional status. Rastafarians, however, stated that such discrimination had diminished considerably in recent years, especially as their styles of clothing and music gained wider acceptance.

Local media outlets continued to provide a forum for extensive, open coverage and debate on religious matters through radio and television shows and on newspaper opinion pages and letters to the editor. Muslim and Jewish groups reported society was tolerant of religious diversity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy held meetings and encouraged dialogue among religious groups, including Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Rastafarians, as part of its overall efforts to promote religious freedom. The Ambassador and other embassy officers promoted equal citizenship, including religious nondiscrimination, and included references to religious freedom and tolerance in speeches and other official communications.