

BAHAMAS 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states that freedom of religion is a fundamental right, with individuals having the right to practice freely the religion of their choice or to practice no religion at all. Discrimination based on religion is prohibited. Practice of Obeah is illegal and violators may be sentenced to three months in prison. Christian prayer accompanied government events and government figures frequently referenced Biblical texts in their speeches.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy representatives met with members of the Bahamas Christian Council and other religious groups to discuss issues of religious freedom and maintain ongoing relationships with leaders of numerous religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 327,000 (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2010 census, more than 90 percent of the population professes a religion. Protestants make up 72 percent of the population and include Baptists (35 percent of the population), 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 groups which together make up less than 4 percent of the population include Greek Orthodox Christians, Jews, Bahais, Jehovah's Witnesses, Rastafarians, Muslims, Black Hebrew Israelites, 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, which is similar to Voodoo. Some members of the small resident Guyanese and Indian populations are Hindu.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the right to worship and to practice one's religion. It forbids infringement on an individual's freedom to choose or change his or her religion

and prohibits discrimination based on belief. Parliament may limit religious practices in the interest of defense, public safety, health, public order, or for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedoms of others. The constitution refers to “an abiding respect for Christian values” in its preamble; however, there is no state-established religious body or official religion.

The practice of Obeah 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.

The publication and sale of any book, writing, or representation deemed to be blasphemous is punishable by up to two years in prison; however, opinions on religious issues “expressed in good faith and in decent language” are not subject to prosecution under the law. This law is traditionally unenforced.

Religious groups have no special registration requirements, although they must legally incorporate 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 incorporate. Incorporation requires religious groups to follow the regulations applicable to non-profit companies, requiring the “undertaking” of the religious organization to be “without pecuniary gain” and to maintain a building for gathering.

The law prohibits marijuana, which holds religious significance for the Rastafarian community.

Religion is a recognized 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. Religious groups may establish private schools. The constitution states that no one shall be compelled to participate in religious instruction or observances of a religion other than his or her own. It allows students, or their guardians in the case of minors, to decline to participate in religious education and observance in private schools. In government schools, students are not permitted to opt out of religious education, which is a core part of final examinations.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government included Christian prayer in all significant events. It was common for government officials and members of parliament to quote religious teachings during speeches, and senior government officials occasionally addressed assemblies during formal religious services.

The government met regularly with the Bahamas Christian Council (BCC), which was composed of religious leaders from the wide spectrum of Christian denominations, to discuss societal, political, and economic issues.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy representatives maintained contacts with a wide variety of religious groups, including smaller groups such as the Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, Bahai, Mennonite, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Rastafarian communities.