

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and belief. A concordat with the Holy See designates Catholicism as the official religion and extends to the Catholic Church special privileges not granted to other religious groups. Non-Catholic religious groups may register as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with the attorney general's office, the Ministry of Finance and the Directorate General of Customs for tax purposes. Non-Catholic groups continued to state they received less government funding and could not access the same preferential customs duties and visas as the Catholic Church. Some groups reported they had difficulty acquiring duty waivers from the Ministry of Finance. Non-Catholic missionaries and religious leaders could not obtain visas under the same immigration category as Catholic religious leaders, which non-Catholic groups said made it more expensive and difficult to bring missionaries to the country.

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

U.S. embassy officials maintained ties with religious representatives and faith groups, meeting with leaders from the Catholic Church, the United Dominican Council for Evangelicals, which represents the Protestant community, officials from the Jewish community, and leaders from the Muslim community, to discuss religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.6 million (July 2016). According to a 2015 Latinobarometer poll, the population is 57 percent Catholic, 25 percent evangelical Protestant, and 13 percent have no declared religion. Groups which together make up 5 percent of the population include Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), non-evangelical Protestants, atheists, and others.

There are approximately 2,500 to 3,000 Muslims, located across the country. Most of the approximately 350 members of the Jewish community live in Santo Domingo, with a small community in Sosua. There are small numbers of Buddhists and Hindus.

Most Haitian immigrants are Catholic. An unknown number practice Voodoo or other African Caribbean beliefs such as Santeria.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and belief. A concordat with the Holy See, in place and unmodified since 1954, 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 Catholic law, use of public funds to underwrite some Catholic Church expenses, and exclusion from customs duties. The Catholic Church retains the authority to revise all textbooks used in public schools throughout the country.

To request exclusion from customs duties, non-Catholic religious groups must register as NGOs with the attorney general's office and later with the Ministry of Finance and the Directorate General of Customs. Registration with the attorney general's office is a two-step process. First, the organization must provide documentation of a fixed address and the names of seven elected officers, have a minimum of 25 members, and pay a nominal fee. Second, the organization must draft and submit statutes and provide copies of government-issued identification documents for the board of directors. After registering, religious groups may request custom duties exclusion from the Ministry of Finance.

The law provides for government recognition of marriages performed by religious groups that register with the Central Electoral Board, provided they otherwise comply with the law.

As part of the concordat with the Vatican, the law requires Bible studies in all public schools; the government does not normally enforce this law. The concordat provides parents with the option of exempting their children from religious studies in public schools. Private schools are exempt from the Bible studies requirement.

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

Government Practices

Non-Catholic religious groups continued to say the Catholic Church had advantages that they did not. According to these groups, the Catholic Church

received significant financial support from the government, including properties that were transferred to the Catholic Church as well as subsidies to the salaries of Catholic Church officials. The Catholic Church reportedly enjoyed broader customs exemptions than non-Catholic organizations, which were required to pay customs duties and then seek refunds on imported food or other goods intended for religious use. These religious groups also continued to report difficulties when applying for and receiving customs duty refunds from the Ministry of Finance. Additionally, non-Catholic missionaries and religious leaders could not obtain visas under the same immigration category as Catholic religious leaders, which non-Catholic groups said made it more expensive and difficult to bring missionaries into the country.

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

U.S. embassy officials maintained ties with religious representatives and faith groups, meeting with leaders from the Catholic Church, the United Dominican Council for Evangelicals, which represents the Protestant community, officials from the Jewish community, including the one Hasidic rabbi in the country, and leaders from the Muslim community, to discuss religious freedom issues and promote religious tolerance.