

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and belief. A concordat with the Holy See designates Roman Catholicism as the official state religion and extends to the Catholic Church special privileges not granted to other religious groups. Privileges include funding for expenses such as administration and construction, visa exceptions, and exemptions for customs duties. Some participants in an interfaith event in November said they did not approve of the government's preference for the Catholic Church, the lack of explicit legal protection for churches beyond what the constitution provided, and the treatment of non-Catholic churches as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In June the Ministry of Education signed agreements to incorporate 15 Christian schools, including non-Catholic Christian schools, into the national education system and provide them with teaching, administrative, and other support staff. Some non-Catholic groups said they still paid customs duties and had to apply for refunds even though the law allows for exemptions. Representatives of some non-Catholic groups stated that while the special privileges given to the Catholic Church through the concordat were unfair, these privileges did not hinder their ability to practice their religion in public and in private.

In February the School of Law at Santo Domingo's Pontifical University and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) cohosted an international conference called Religious Liberty as a Fundamental Right. Participants emphasized the importance of laws and the need for the objective administration of justice by judges as a means to guarantee religious liberty.

In November an official from the Ministry of the Presidency participated in an interfaith gathering hosted by the Ambassador. Representatives from 25 religious groups and faith-based organizations also attended the event, where issues discussed included religious freedom, the concordat, government financial support of churches, and legal protections for churches. In October an embassy official met with the Interfaith Dialogue Table to discuss religious freedom and the organization's plans for interfaith initiatives in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.3 million (July 2018 estimate). According to a 2017 Latinobarometer survey, the population is 48 percent Catholic, compared with 57 percent in a 2015 Latinobarometer survey and 64 percent in 1995. The same survey indicates 21 percent of the population is evangelical Protestant, compared with 13 percent in the 2015 survey, and 21 percent have no declared religion or identify as atheist or agnostic, compared with 13 percent in 2015. Other faiths include Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ, and nonevangelical Protestants. The Dominican Council of Evangelical Unity estimated in March that evangelical Protestants make up 30 percent of the population, with the number of Pentecostals growing the fastest.

There are approximately 2,500 to 3,000 Muslims throughout 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, Hindus, and Baha'is.

Most Haitian immigrants are Catholic. According to the Dominican National Statistics Office, in 2017 there were 497,825 Haitian immigrants in the country. An unknown number practice Voodoo or other Afro-Caribbean beliefs such as Santeria.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of "conscience and worship, subject to public order and respect for social norms." A 1954 concordat with the Holy See designates Catholicism as the official state religion and extends special privileges to the Catholic Church not granted to other religious groups. These privileges include the special protection of the state in the exercise of Catholic ministry, exemption of Catholic clergy from military service, permission to provide Catholic instruction in public orphanages, public funding to underwrite some Catholic Church expenses, and exemption from customs duties.

To request exemption from customs duties, non-Catholic religious groups must first register as NGOs with the Attorney General's Office and the Ministry of Finance. Registration with the Attorney General's Office, which applies to nonprofit organizations generally and is not specifically for religious groups, 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 customs duty exemption status from the Ministry of Finance.

The law provides for government recognition of marriages performed by religious groups registered with the Central Electoral Board. The law requires churches to have legal status and presence in the country for at least five years, provide a membership list, and train clergy on how to perform marriages. Churches are responsible for determining the legal qualification of couples, and they must record all marriages performed and make those lists available for government inspection. Failure to comply with the regulations governing marriage can result in misdemeanor sanctions or fines.

The concordat grants the Catholic Church free access to prisons. The government states it allows access to all faiths in prisons. All faiths have the right to perform religious acts in prisons, in community or alone.

As part of the concordat with the Holy See, the law requires religious studies based on Catholic Church teachings in all public schools. The concordat accords the Catholic Church the right to revise and approve textbooks used in public schools throughout the country. The concordat also provides parents with the option of exempting their children from religious studies in public schools at both the elementary and secondary levels. Private schools are exempt from the religious studies requirement; however, private schools run by religious groups may teach religious studies according to their beliefs. A law mandating reading the Bible in public schools is not enforced.

The government imposes no immigration restrictions or quotas on religious workers. Foreign missionaries may obtain a one-year multi-entry business visa through the Ministry of Foreign Relations after submitting a completed application form, original passport, two passport-size photographs, and a document offering proof as to the business activity from the institution or person in the country with whom the missionary is affiliated. Foreign missionaries may renew the visa before the original one-year visa has expired.

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

Government Practices

Non-Catholic religious groups continued to report the government provided the Catholic Church significant financial support unavailable to them, including properties transferred to the Catholic Church and subsidies to the salaries of Catholic Church officials.

At the interfaith event in November, some of the 26 participants expressed dissatisfaction with the government's preference for the Catholic Church, the lack of explicit legal protection for churches beyond what the constitution provides, and the treatment of non-Catholic churches as NGOs rather than as religious organizations under the law.

A non-Catholic religious organization said the government still required it to pay customs duties on imported food and other items and then apply for a refund instead of receiving an exemption as allowed by law. Religious groups continued to report difficulties when applying for and receiving customs duty refunds from the Ministry of Finance.

In June the Ministry of Education signed agreements to incorporate 15 Christian schools, including non-Catholic Christian schools, into the national education system and provide them with teaching, administrative, and other support staff. The agreements allowed these schools to continue offering the same religious instruction as before the agreements. The voluntary transfer of the schools to state administration was the result of a 2014 presidential promise to spend 4 percent of the country's gross domestic product on education.

In October a legislator introduced a resolution in the Congress of Deputies to enforce the law requiring the reading of the Bible in public schools, which would occur after raising the national flag and singing the national anthem. One prominent legislator declared the resolution violated the constitution and the country's status as a secular state, but many others declared strong support for it. Legislative leaders sent the resolution to the education committee for further deliberation.

In December the minister of education told Catholic and Protestant religious leaders that he sought a "strategic alliance" between churches, schools, and the family as a means to reform the country's education system. He also invited church participation in improving the quality of education based on Christian values and principals.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In February the Pontifical University in Santo Domingo and the Church of Jesus Christ cohosted an international conference, Religious Liberty as a Fundamental Right. Participants emphasized the importance of laws and judges in ensuring religious liberty.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In November an official from the Ministry of the Presidency and representatives from 26 religious groups and faith-based organizations participated in an interfaith gathering hosted by the Ambassador at the embassy for a discussion on religious freedom. The representatives were leaders from the Catholic Church; Interfaith Dialogue Table; National Co-fraternal Council of Evangelical Churches; Center for the Investigation and Study of Religion; Christian Church Liaison Office of the Presidency; Social Service Executive of Dominican Churches; the Church of Jesus Christ; Jewish community; and Protestant community. Issues discussed included the concordat, government financial support of churches, and the legal status of churches. The Ambassador spoke of the importance of religious freedom to her personally, noting that in 1938 the Dominican Republic took in Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution in Europe. She emphasized religious freedom is a fundamental value of the United States and one of the foundations of its success as a nation. In October an embassy official met with the Interfaith Dialogue Table, which included representatives from Protestant and Catholic churches, to discuss religious liberty and the organization's plans for future interfaith initiatives.