

ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of thought and religion, as well as the right to practice and change one's religion or belief. The government completed construction on a first-ever public Rastafarian-run school, at which vaccinations are not required for school entry. The government announced that, for economic reasons, it was considering amending the law to rescind the designation of Sunday as a holiday. According to opposition leader Harold Lovell of the United Progressive Party, removing the Sunday holiday designation could infringe on citizens' right to practice their religion.

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

U.S. embassy officials engaged representatives of the government and civil society on religious freedom issues, including the importance of respect for religious diversity. They discussed issues involving government facilitation of religious diversity and tolerance and equal treatment under the law.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 97,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 17.6 percent of the population is Anglican, 12.4 percent Seventh-day Adventist, 12.2 percent Pentecostal, 8.3 percent Moravian, 8.2 percent Roman Catholic, and 5.6 percent Methodist. Those with unspecified or no religious beliefs account for 5.5 percent and 5.9 percent of the population, respectively. Members of the Baptist Church, the Church of God, and the Wesleyan Holiness Consortium each account for less than 5 percent. The census categorizes an additional 12.2 percent of the population as belonging to other religious groups, including Rastafarians, Muslims, Hindus, and Baha'is, without providing percentages for each group. Based on anecdotal information, these four religious groups are listed from largest to smallest.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of thought and religion, as well as the right to change and practice one's religion or belief. The constitution protects individuals from taking oaths contradictory to their beliefs or participating in events and activities of religions not their own, including participating in or receiving unwanted religious education. These rights may be limited in the interests of defense or public safety, order, morality, or health, or to protect the rights of others, unless actions under such limitations can be shown "not to be reasonably justifiable in a democratic society." The constitution prohibits members of the clergy from running for elected office. No law may be adopted that contradicts these constitutional provisions. The government does not enforce a law outlawing blasphemous language in a public place or any other place that would "cause annoyance to the public."

The government does not require religious groups to register; however, to receive tax- and duty-free concessions and to own, build, or renovate property, religious groups must register with the government. To register, religious groups must fill out an online tax form that describes the group's activities. The government uses this form to determine the group's tax status. The Inland Revenue Department reviews and approves the completed form, usually granting registration and tax concessions.

The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools. Private schools may provide religious instruction. Public schools require parents to immunize their children to attend school. Some private schools do not require immunizations for their students. The law also permits homeschooling.

The law decriminalizing marijuana for any use also recognizes the government's responsibility to uphold the religious rights of persons of the Hindu and Rastafarian faiths. It allows these persons to apply for a special religious license to cultivate the plant within their private dwelling, use the plant for religious purposes within their private dwelling or within their approved place of worship, and transport the plant between their private dwelling and approved place of worship. The special religious license, however, does not permit any commercial or financial transaction involving any part of the cannabis plant.

Occupational health regulations require individuals with dreadlocks to cover their hair when they work with food, hazardous equipment, or in the health sector. These regulations apply to both public- and private-sector workplaces.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In the wake of decriminalization of marijuana use and cultivation for religious purposes, Rastafarian leaders continued to state publicly the government had taken steps to recognize the dignity and worth of the Rastafarian community. In January the government's ambassador to Ethiopia and a Rastafarian elder, Ras Frank I Francis, publicly commended the government for having apologized in the past for "the atrocities that went against the movement."

In September the government completed construction on a Rastafarian-run public school that conformed to the standards of all other government primary schools but did not require immunizations for enrollment. According to media reports, Rastafarian leaders praised the government for what they termed "the first construction of Rastafari buildings globally." Prime Minister Gaston Browne stated, "No one in this country should be denied education because of their religious beliefs." Also attending the event, Minister of Education Michael Browne stated, "Education is not about what you are wearing, education is not about the length of your hair. Education transcends your religious beliefs. Education is a collection not of a melting pot but of a rich salad bowl of our history." Other Rastafarians continued to choose homeschooling for their children or private schools where vaccinations were not required.

Citing escalating costs in tourism-related services, the government announced it was considering rescinding the holiday designation for Sunday by amending the law. According to opposition leader Harold Lovell, of the United Progressive Party, removing the Sunday holiday designation could infringe on the rights of each individual to practice his or her religion.

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 and Engagement

Embassy officials continued to engage government officials from the Office of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Legal Affairs, as well as police leadership, to

emphasize the importance of respect for religious diversity, tolerance, and equal treatment under the law.

Embassy officials also met with civil society representatives, including the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Christian Council, to discuss religious freedom issues, including the importance of respect for religious diversity, freedom of religious expression, and discrimination based on religion.