

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 2019 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, including administration and construction, visa exceptions, and exemptions for customs duties. Some members of non-Catholic groups said they did not approve of the government's preference for the Catholic Church, lack of explicit legal protection for churches beyond what the constitution provided, and treatment of non-Catholic churches as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). According to representatives of non-Catholic groups, a draft law to register and regulate religious entities, if passed, could reduce what they characterized as unequal treatment of religious groups in the country. While representatives of non-Catholic groups continued to state the special privileges given to the Catholic Church through the concordat were unfair, these administrative privileges did not hinder their ability to practice their faiths in public and in private.

In November the Pontifical University in Santo Domingo, Brigham Young University, the Latin American Consortium of Religious Freedom, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) hosted an international conference, titled "Religious Freedom and Human Dignity." Participants discussed the contribution of religion to society and how to promote the freedom of religion in the region through cooperation and tolerance.

In November the Ambassador met with an official from the Ministry of the Presidency to discuss the government's stance on the privileges afforded to the Catholic Church through the concordat. Embassy officials discussed with non-Catholic leaders their efforts to pass a law to register and regulate religious entities that would address unequal access to government resources by religious groups in the country. The embassy donated funds to preserve and digitize museum archives telling the story of Jewish refugees welcomed to the country after fleeing Nazi persecution in Europe and shared these efforts on its social media pages.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.4 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to a 2019 Latinobarometer survey, the population is 49 percent Catholic, compared with 55 percent in a 2016 Latinobarometer survey and 68 percent in 2008. The same survey indicates 26 percent of the population is evangelical Protestant, compared with 12 percent in 2008. The 2017 Latinobarometer survey found 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. According to a November estimate by the Dominican Council of Evangelical Unity, evangelical Protestants make up approximately 30 percent of the population, with the number of Pentecostals growing the fastest.

According to representatives of the Muslim community, there are approximately 2,000 to 2,500 Muslims throughout the country. Jewish leaders estimate 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 Christians, including evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and Seventh-day Adventists. According to the Dominican National Statistics Office, in 2017, the most recent survey year, there were 498,000 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 in the civil registry within three working days of the marriage. Failure to comply with these regulations may result in misdemeanor sanctions or fines, including 100 pesos (\$2) for each day over the recording deadline, marriage license suspension, or up to five years in prison.

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

The concordat and subsequent biblical studies law ratified in 2000 require religious studies based in either Catholic or evangelical Protestant teachings in all elementary and secondary public schools. It provides parents with the option of excusing their children from this course. Private schools are exempt from the biblical studies requirement; however, private schools run by religious groups may teach religious studies according to their beliefs.

The biblical studies law also mandates the Bible be read in public schools at the beginning of each day after the national anthem. This aspect of the law is currently not enforced.

Foreign missionaries may obtain a one-year multi-entry business visa through the Ministry of Foreign Relations after submitting a document offering proof of 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 state that 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. They expressed dissatisfaction with the government's preference for the Catholic Church, lack of explicit legal protection for religious groups beyond what the constitution provides, and treatment under the law of non-Catholic churches as NGOs rather than as religious organizations. In March a draft law to register and regulate religious entities was reintroduced and considered in the lower house of congress. By year's end, it was not brought to a vote. Some non-Catholic leaders said the law would address unequal access to government resources by religious groups that they believed result from the concordat with the Catholic Church. Some political observers said that since it was a pre-election year, legislators and others were focused on other issues.

A non-Catholic religious organization continued to state the government 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. Several religious groups continued to report difficulties when applying for and receiving customs duty refunds from the Ministry of Finance.

Debate about reading the Bible in public schools continued. In June the lower house of congress passed a resolution calling attention to the lack of enforcement of the law requiring the reading of the Bible in public schools. In response, the Ministry of Education issued a statement saying it would not enforce the law because it violated the constitution and the rights of families to decide what faith their children practice.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In November the Pontifical University in Santo Domingo, Brigham Young University, Latin American Consortium of Religious Freedom, and the Church of Jesus Christ hosted an international conference titled "Religious Freedom and Human Dignity." More than 200 participants attended the two-day symposium that covered various topics, including how to promote religious freedom through cooperation and tolerance in Latin America and the Caribbean. During the closing session, religious leaders from the region, including the Dominican Republic,

Haiti, and Jamaica, signed an accord to promote and defend religious freedom in all 15 participating countries.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In November the Ambassador met with an official from the Ministry of the Presidency to discuss the government's stance on the concordat with the Catholic Church, government financial support of churches, and legal status of other religious groups.

The Ambassador met with Jewish leaders and spoke of the legacy of religious freedom, noting the Dominican Republic was the only country at the 1938 Evian Conference that committed to take Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution in Europe. The embassy donated funds to preserve and digitize Sosua Jewish Museum archives that tell the story of Jews who found safe haven in the country during the Holocaust. The embassy highlighted these efforts on its social media platforms to showcase the values of religious freedom and the country's history of religious acceptance.

The Ambassador met with leaders of the Catholic Church to discuss its role in advocating for the rights of vulnerable populations in the country, including religious minorities. Embassy officials also engaged with non-Catholic leaders to learn about efforts to pass a law that would create a process to register and regulate religious entities.