

DOMINICA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including freedom of thought, freedom to practice one's religion, and freedom from oaths contrary to one's beliefs. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in March, the government temporarily suspended all public religious gatherings. On May 30, the government granted special permission and provided protocols exclusively for churches and places of worship to reopen provided they had no more than 250 individuals in attendance and implemented health protocols. Rastafarians continued to press the government to legalize marijuana use. On October 26, the parliament decriminalized the possession of up to 28 grams of marijuana for personal religious use to individuals 18 years and above.

Interdenominational organizations continued their efforts to advance respect for religious freedom and diversity. Televised religious services were available throughout a government-mandated COVID-19 shutdown from March 24 to May 30, and religious groups broadcast via radio, television, and social media. In September, the Dominica Association of Evangelical Churches (DAEC) and other religious groups established counseling hotlines for persons experiencing fear, worry, or emotional stress as a result of COVID-19.

The U.S. embassy continued to maintain social media engagement on religious freedom. In January, for example, a series of posts highlighted U.S. National Religious Freedom Day, including the history of religious freedom in the Eastern Caribbean.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 74,200 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the U.S. government, Roman Catholic represent 61.4 percent of the population, Protestants 28.6 percent, Rastafarians 1.3 percent, Jehovah's Witnesses 1.2 percent, and those listing "other" 0.3 percent; 6.1 percent report no religious affiliation, and 1.1 percent are unspecified. According to the most recent census in 2011, approximately 53 percent of the population is Catholic. Evangelical Protestants constitute approximately 20 percent of the population. The largest evangelical Protestant groups are Pentecostals with 6 percent, Baptists with 5 percent, and the Christian Union Mission, with 4 percent. Seventh-day Adventists constitute 7 percent of the population. Other smaller

religious groups include Anglicans, Methodists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Rastafarians, and Baha'is. According to the census, 9 percent of the population professes no religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including freedom of thought, freedom to practice one's religion, and freedom from taking oaths contrary to one's beliefs. By law, the government may make exceptions to constitutionally required provisions in the interests of public order and morality if the exceptions are for activities "shown not to be reasonably justifiable in a democratic society."

The constitution prohibits a minister of a religion from being qualified to run in an election.

Religious groups seeking nonprofit status must register with the Attorney General's Office. They must submit a letter signed by five executives of the religious group and provide the official name of the group and an address identifying the place of worship. The registration fee is 25 Eastern Caribbean dollars (\$9). The Attorney General's Registry Office reviews and approves applications. Any organization denied permission to register has the right to apply for judicial review. By law, religious groups also must register buildings used to publish marriage banns (announcements of marriage) or used as places of worship.

The constitution grants religious groups the right to establish and maintain private schools and to provide religious instruction. Students of different religions may attend private schools run by religious groups of another affiliation. Public schools may hold nondenominational prayers, and attendance is optional. The law requires the vaccination of all children to attend both public and private schools. The government does not offer a waiver for children without vaccinations. Parents may homeschool their children.

Dreadlocks are prohibited in all government-funded schools as well as in prisons.

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

Government Practices

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on March 24, the government temporarily suspended all public religious gatherings, including funerals with more than 10 persons in attendance. On May 30, the government granted special permission and provided protocols exclusively for churches and places of worship to reopen provided they had no more than 250 individuals in attendance and implemented health protocols, such as hand hygiene and wearing masks.

The DAEC and Catholic representatives continued to advocate for the repeal of a law prohibiting licensed clergy from running for public office.

Rastafarians continued to press the government for complete legalization of marijuana use, stating they considered decriminalization to be a commercially focused half-measure. Representatives of the Rastafarian community said authorities did not enforce the law against using marijuana when the community used it in its religious rites.

In July, Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit urged parliament to decriminalize the possession of up to 28 grams of marijuana for “medical, religious, and recreational use” and to “expunge the criminal records of all persons previously convicted for possessing small quantities of marijuana that were clearly not for sale.” He subsequently pledged, “The government will forge ahead on the matter of developing a revenue stream and foreign exchange earnings from a marijuana industry.” On October 26, Parliament decriminalized the possession of up to 28 grams of marijuana to individuals 18 years and above for personal religious use.

The government continued to subsidize teacher salaries at all private schools run by religious organizations, including those affiliated with the Catholic, Methodist, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches.

At public schools, teachers, principals, and students continued to lead nondenominational prayers during morning assemblies, but students were not required to participate.

On September 17, the Dominica Christian Council applied for, and received, the High Court’s permission to intervene in a 2019 constitutional challenge to the country’s anti-sodomy law. LGBTI groups called the challenge a “delay tactic” by the Dominica Christian Council, because the council opposes overturning the law.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious groups produced live and recorded televised religious services throughout the COVID shutdown, broadcasting on radio, television, and social media. In September, the DAEC and other religious groups established counseling hotlines for persons experiencing fear, worry, or emotional stress as a result of COVID-19.

Interdenominational organizations continued their efforts to advance respect for religious freedom and diversity. For example in January, individuals from the Israel United For Christ marched in Roseau, distributing flyers explaining their belief that blacks and Hispanics are descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel and welcoming interfaith dialogue; on March 6, Christian women of numerous denominations celebrated World Prayer Day, emphasizing the importance of peace and the need to help victims of poverty, violence, and human trafficking, and in September, religious leaders held prayer and reflection ceremonies to commemorate the third anniversary of the deaths of local citizens in Hurricane Maria. Both the Catholic Church and the DAEC periodically hosted prayer gatherings.

The DAEC continued to support the government's ban on same-sex marriage.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials and staff maintained social media engagement on religious freedom. In January, for example, a series of posts highlighted U.S. National Religious Freedom Day, including underscoring the history of religious freedom in the Eastern Caribbean.