

SAINT LUCIA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and individuals' right to change, manifest, and propagate the religion of their choosing. It grants religious groups the right to establish and maintain schools and provide religious instruction. The law requires religious groups with more than 250 members to register. In July, the Association of Saint Lucian Muslims was officially registered as a religious organization. A Jewish community representative said the government increased its communication and cooperation with the Jewish community during the year, but the country's single Jewish organization, Chabad, continued to await formal recognition as a religious organization. According to Rastafarian representatives, continued government enforcement of marijuana laws discouraged Rastafarians from using marijuana for religious purposes. In August, a government commission submitted its recommendations for reforming the regulatory framework for cannabis; the report was not made public by year's end. The Ministry of Education generally enforced the requirement of vaccinations for all children attending school, but granted some waivers on religious grounds. National insurance plans did not cover traditional healers used by the Rastafarian community, according to community members. Rastafarians again reported officials from the Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Empowerment, Youth Development, Sports, and Local Government engaged in constructive dialogue and outreach with the Rastafarian community.

According to a local imam with the Islamic Association, some male and female members of the Muslim community experienced verbal harassment when they wore head coverings and clothing that identified them as Muslim. The Christian Council, comprised of the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and Methodist Churches, the Salvation Army, and the Evangelical Association of the Caribbean, continued to hold interdenominational meetings to promote respect for religious diversity and tolerance.

U.S. embassy officials discussed the status of public consultations on marijuana decriminalization, the Religious Advisory Committee, and general issues related to respect for religious minorities with officials of the Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Empowerment, Youth Development, Sports, and Local Government, which is responsible for issues regarding religious groups. Embassy officials also discussed issues related to religious freedom with leaders of the Rastafarian, Christian, and Jewish communities on several occasions during the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 166,500 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census, Roman Catholics are 61.4 percent of the population; Seventh-day Adventists, 10.4 percent; Pentecostals, 8.8 percent; evangelical Christians, 2.2 percent; Baptists, 2.1 percent; and Rastafarians, 2 percent. Other groups, together constituting less than 2 percent of the population, include Anglicans, members of the Church of God, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Muslims, Hindus, and Baha'is. Nearly 6 percent of the population claims no religious affiliation. Unofficial estimates of the Muslim population, which is mainly Sunni, range from 150 to 400 individuals. According to the Jewish community, there are approximately 200 Jewish residents, most of whom are not citizens.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states “a person shall not be hindered in the enjoyment of” freedom of conscience, including of thought and religion, and in the manifestation and propagation of religion or belief through practice, worship, teaching, and observance. It protects individuals' rights to change their religion and prohibits religious instruction without consent in schools, prisons, and military service. A blasphemy law is not enforced.

The Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Empowerment, Youth Development, Sports, and Local Government is responsible for religious affairs, implements the government's policy on faith-based organizations, and meets regularly with religious groups to address their concerns. The government requires religious groups to register with the ministry if their membership exceeds 250 individuals. To register, groups must provide contact information, their establishment date and history, declaration of belief, number of members, location of meeting place, and income sources. The government “incorporates” registered groups, which are eligible to receive associated benefits, while it treats unregistered groups as for-profit organizations for taxation purposes. After the religious group registers with the ministry, it may apply for concessions, including duty-free import privileges, tax benefits, and exemption from some labor requirements. Formal government registration also allows registered religious groups to legally register marriages officiated by religious leaders.

Ministry of Education regulations require the vaccination of all schoolchildren, regardless of religious beliefs, before they enter public or private school; however, the ministry grants some exemptions based on religion. The public school curriculum includes religious studies; the Ministry of Education does not require students to participate in these classes. The classes familiarize students with the core beliefs of world religions rather than promoting any particular faith. The constitution grants religious groups the right to establish and maintain schools and provide religious instruction at their own expense. The Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, and Anglican Churches each sponsor private schools, in which they teach their respective religious beliefs. The government provides approximately 50 percent of the funding for these schools but does not cover expenses for classes on religion. All students may attend private religious schools regardless of belief or nonbelief.

The government's registration policy defines the process of obtaining work and labor permits for missionaries. Immigration authorities grant work permits for individuals entering the country to conduct missionary work. As long as an individual is law abiding, there are no restrictions on any category of foreign missionaries.

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

Government Practices

In July, the government approved an application from the Association of Saint Lucian Muslims to be registered as a religious organization.

A representative of the Jewish community said the community had requested the government to lower the registration threshold to 200 members. He said the government had previously revised the threshold down from 500 to 250. The representative said the government increased its communication and cooperation with the Jewish community during the year, but that its request for registration was pending at year's end.

The Rastafarian community again stated that officials from the Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Empowerment, Youth Development, Sports, and Local Government engaged in constructive dialogue with their community leaders and outreach with the broader Rastafarian community. They said the primary issue discussed was encouraging the government to legalize marijuana for religious purposes. In

August, a government commission established to develop recommendations regarding possible steps towards legalizing or decriminalizing marijuana issued its report to the government. The commission's mandate focused on the commercial benefits of cannabis production. The report's recommendations were not made public by year's end. Representatives of the Rastafarian community said they were awaiting the public release of the report and were encouraged by the general trend towards decriminalization and legalization of marijuana in the Caribbean. They said this trend could eventually lead to legal reforms that would allow Rastafarians to legally use marijuana for religious purposes.

Rastafarian community representatives reported their reluctance to use marijuana for religious purposes because marijuana use was illegal and subject to punitive fines. Rastafarians said that, during the year, police increased enforcement of marijuana laws, including raids on marijuana plantations during the COVID-19 lockdown period. According to police leadership, enforcement would continue "until the law has changed."

While members of the Rastafarian community said the Ministry of Education maintained enforcement of regulations requiring the vaccination of children to attend school, they said the government continued to provide waivers to Rastafarian families that cited their religious belief in not vaccinating their children. Some Rastafarians said they decided to vaccinate their children so they could attend school when a waiver was not granted; others chose to homeschool. According to Rastafarian representatives, the government granted waivers when parents clearly cited religion as the basis for the request; if this information was not provided, the government did not approve the waiver. Rastafarians said the lack of insurance coverage for traditional doctors some Rastafarians used continued to be a problem due to high costs.

The government continued to consult with the Pentecostal Assemblies of the West Indies, as well as the Christian Council, comprising representatives of the Catholic Church and some Protestant denominations, on issues relevant to their communities. It also continued its informal meetings with members of the Rastafarian community on pending legislation and policies, including certification of priests to sign marriage certificates, issues surrounding required vaccinations for school attendance, and cannabis legalization.

The government continued to consult with the Religious Advisory Committee, an official entity composed of leaders from different religious communities, along with a nonvoting government official, to develop regulatory and legal reforms and

program recommendations for approval by the Cabinet of Ministers. Issues discussed included the Jewish community's request to lower the required minimum membership threshold of 250 persons.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

An imam associated with the Islamic Association said members of society generally accepted the Muslim community. He said neighbors accepted the daily calls to prayer; however, members of the community continued to report verbal harassment in public spaces when they wore Islamic religious attire. They said harassment included insulting name-calling and inappropriate questioning by members of the public. Rastafarians reported being "accepted by society," including in the workplace and at school.

The Christian Council and the Evangelical Association of the Caribbean continued to hold interdenominational meetings to promote respect for religious diversity and tolerance. Various religious groups said they were collaborating to advance social dialogue and conduct outreach programs in the community that addressed freedom of religious expression, tolerance, and discrimination.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials discussed with government officials the status of public consultations on marijuana decriminalization, the priorities of the Religious Advisory Committee, the status of the Islamic Association's registration application, and the status of the Jewish community's request to lower the registration threshold. They also emphasized the importance of respect for religious minorities with officials of the Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Empowerment, Youth Development, Sports, and Local Government.

Embassy officials engaged Rastafarian, Jewish, and Christian leaders on the importance of promoting freedom of religious expression and combating societal discrimination based on religion. The embassy used social media throughout the year to promote religious freedom in Saint Lucia and celebrate religious pluralism. Articles and social media posts recognized diverse religious holidays and explained how U.S. religious communities participated in the COVID-19 response.