

# SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom of individuals to change their religion. Religious organizations may register as nonprofit religious institutions with the government or register as corporations, which requires an application to parliament. Early in the year, the government formally registered the Islamic Center of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which operates three mosques, as the country's first incorporated Islamic nonprofit organization. Parliament continued to consider a bill proposed by the government in 2019 that would decriminalize possession and use of small amounts of marijuana, including for religious purposes. Government officials continued to support Rastafarians and all other religious groups' use of cannabis for sacramental purposes. According to government officials, during the year, the Ministry of Education, National Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information approved exemptions from the requirement of vaccinations for school enrollment, an issue that had affected Rastafarians with school-age children. Senior government officials publicly defended the right of religious freedom, including through public speeches. Government officials also said the Ministry of Education, Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information applied the constitution's nondiscrimination clauses to include religious observance in schools, including the wearing of dreadlocks by Rastafarians and Thusia Seventh-day Adventists.

Rastafarians said they were increasingly accepted in society, and overall the country's citizens were becoming more tolerant of their way of life. Rastafarians stated, however, they still faced discrimination in both private and public job markets and in some private schools due to their appearance.

U.S. embassy officials continued to underscore with government officials the need to respect all religious groups and protect religious freedom as a fundamental right. Embassy officials also met virtually with individuals from the Christian and Muslim communities and nongovernmental organizations to discuss governmental and societal support for religious freedom, including respect for religious minorities. The embassy used Facebook to promote messages regarding the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity across the Eastern Caribbean.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 102,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2012 government census, 82.3 percent of the population identifies as Christian, among them Pentecostals composing 27.6 percent, Anglicans 13.9 percent, Seventh-day Adventists 11.6 percent (including Thusia Seventh-day Adventists), Baptists 8.9 percent, Methodists 8.7 percent, and Roman Catholics 6.3 percent. Rastafarians account for 1.1 percent of the population. Those with no religious affiliation account for 7.5 percent of the population; those listed as “no religion stated” constitute 4.7 percent; and those listed as “other religion” constitute 4.3 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Hindus and Muslims, the former primarily of East Indian origin. There is also a small number of followers of the Baha’i Faith.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution affirms the country “is founded on the belief in the supremacy of God.” The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, including freedom of thought and of religion and freedom of an individual to change his or her religion or belief. In addition, he or she has the freedom to practice his or her religion, either alone or in community with others, and both in public and in private. There are provisions in the criminal code that criminalize “blasphemous” or “profane” speech “in any public place,” punishable by a three-month prison term; however, these provisions are not enforced.

The constitution permits freedom of association, and there are no regulations regarding freedom to organize and worship. Religious organizations may register as nonprofit religious institutions with the Ministry of Education, National Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information and qualify for tax exemptions. Organizations may also register as corporations, which requires an application to the government and the issuance of a certificate of incorporation by parliament.

The constitution grants religious groups the right to establish schools and provide religious instruction to those wishing to receive it. Students in public schools receive nondenominational religious instruction based on Christianity. Christian prayers are recited at school assemblies; attendance and participation are not

mandatory. Students wishing to opt out of Christian prayer or religious education classes are excused from participation. Religious observance exemptions are allowed under the constitution's nondiscrimination clause. These include exemptions from vaccinations on religious grounds. Otherwise, by law, vaccinations are required for school enrollment in all schools receiving government funding. The law permits homeschooling.

Marijuana use is permitted for medical purposes and scientific research. According to government statements, the use of marijuana is also permitted for religious sacraments, but this policy is not enshrined in law.

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

### **Government Practices**

Early in the year, the government approved the Islamic Center of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which operates three mosques, as the country's first Islamic religious nonprofit organization.

According to the government, there were 146 religious groups with approximately 500 registered religious nonprofit organizations representing those denominations. Government officials said every year they received an average of 12 applications, primarily from registered organizations establishing a new branch or reorganizing their structure.

During the year, parliament continued to consider the government's proposed bill, introduced in April 2019, which would decriminalize possession and use of small amounts of nonmedical marijuana. Government officials reiterated Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves' 2019 statement to parliament that Rastafarians and all other religious groups were permitted to use cannabis for sacramental purposes.

According to government officials, during the year, the Ministry of Education, National Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information approved exemptions from the requirement of vaccinations for school enrollment, an issue that had affected Rastafarians with school-age children. Government officials also said the ministry applied the constitution's nondiscrimination clauses to include religious observance in schools, including the wearing of dreadlocks by Rastafarians and Thusia Seventh-day Adventists.

The Ministry of Education, Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information said religious accommodations continued to permit dreadlocks for Rastafarians at some workplaces, including construction sites, with appropriate headgear such as a Tam or Rastacap, similar to an elongated ski cap, to ensure safety.

Senior government officials defended the right of religious freedom, including through public speeches.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Rastafarians said they were increasingly accepted in society, and overall the country's citizens were becoming more tolerant of their way of life. Rastafarians stated, however, they still faced discrimination in both private and public job markets and in some private schools due to their appearance.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy officials continued to underscore with government officials the need to respect all religious groups and protect religious freedom as a fundamental right. Embassy officials discussed previous Rastafarian concerns regarding the prohibition of dreadlocks and vaccination requirements, now resolved, with the Ministry of Education, Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information.

Embassy officials also discussed governmental and societal support for religious freedom, including respect for religious minorities, in virtual meetings with members of Christian and Muslim communities.

The embassy continued to use Facebook to promote messages about the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity across the Eastern Caribbean.