

SAINT LUCIA 2021 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 with the government. The Islamic Association of Saint Lucia, which officially registered as a religious organization in 2020, continued to seek land to build a mosque and cemetery and to request exemptions from a law mandating casket burials. The country's single Jewish organization, Chabad, still pursued formal government recognition. According to Rastafarian representatives, the September passage of legislation decriminalizing marijuana possession – accompanied by an apology for past discrimination from Prime Minister Philip J. Pierre – was a welcome step, but Rastafarians called for further action, such as legalizing cannabis production or expunging criminal records of those previously convicted. Together with their Muslim counterparts, Christian groups stated they were generally supportive of COVID-19 vaccines and of pandemic-related health measures; Rastafarians opposed the vaccinations. The Christian Council, composed of the Roman Catholic Church and some Protestant churches, and the Evangelical Association of the Caribbean engaged the government on issues of interest to members – and ultimately obtained a religious exemption to the all-day Sunday curfew imposed for much of the fourth quarter of the year. One religious leader said registration was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic because only registered groups were legally allowed to hold services.

According to an Islamic Association representative, there was respect generally for Muslims in the country, but reports of verbal street harassment continued to appear on social media. The Christian Council continued to hold interdenominational meetings to promote respect for religious diversity and tolerance.

U.S. embassy officials discussed the priorities of the Religious Affairs Council, the status of the Islamic Association's request for land and changes to burial laws, and the status of the Jewish community's request to lower the registration threshold with officials of the Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Empowerment, Youth Development, Sports, and Local Government, which is responsible for most issues regarding religious groups. Embassy officials also discussed issues related to religious freedom with leaders of the Rastafarian, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities on several occasions during the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 167,000 (midyear 2021). According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census, the latest available, 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. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has approximately 250 members in the country. 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 noncitizens.

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 exists but 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 in the same manner as for-profit organizations for taxation purposes. Registration costs 500 Eastern Caribbean dollars (\$190). 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 legally to register marriages officiated by religious leaders.

Ministry of Education regulations require the vaccination of all schoolchildren, 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 what are known as “assisted” schools, such as those sponsored by the Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, and Anglican Churches. The government provides approximately 50 percent of the funding for assisted schools but does not cover expenses for classes on religion. All students may attend assisted 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 in exchange for a weekly fee of 200 Eastern Caribbean dollars (\$74). As long as they abide by the law, foreign missionaries face no other restrictions or obligations.

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

Government Practices

Registered as a religious organization in 2020, the Islamic Association of Saint Lucia reported continuing obstacles. According to its representatives, the association’s requests for land to build a mosque and cemetery were not successful, nor were its efforts to seek exception to a law mandating burials in coffins, contravening the Islamic practice requiring casketless burials. A government official said there were no legal barriers to mosque construction and suggested a lack of available land as one reason requests for land had not yet been approved.

Islamic Association representatives said the association’s engagement with the government-coordinated Religious Affairs Council as well as membership on the board of the Bordelais Correctional Facility, the country’s only prison, were encouraging developments. The council, an official entity, consisted of representatives of registered Christian groups and one non-Christian representative, all elected by their respective communities, and a nonvoting government official. During the year, competitive elections were held among the Islamic Association as

well as the Jewish, Baha'i, Rastafarian, and Buddhist communities for the non-Christian seat on the council, which a representative from the Rastafarian community won.

A representative of Chabad labeled the registration threshold requiring a minimum of 250 members “arbitrary” and said lack of registration prevented Jews from holding services. He said he was confident that the new government under Prime Minister Pierre, sworn into office on July 28, would approve its registration request. By year’s end, however, the Prime Minister did not approve the registration request. One religious leader said registration was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic because only registered groups were legally allowed to hold services.

Rastafarian community representatives said they welcomed the September passage of legislation decriminalizing the possession of up to 30 grams (approximately one ounce) of cannabis, but some called for further legal reforms that would expunge the criminal records of those previously convicted of marijuana-related offenses. After apologizing for past discrimination against Rastafarians, Prime Minister Pierre said, “This is the first step of many as we seek to create a medicinal and recreational cannabis industry and decriminalize the use of cannabis. Rastafarians in Saint Lucia will be able to practice their religion without fear of flouting our country’s law.” Some Rastafarians stated the law’s focus on possession was illogical because production remained illegal, while other Rastafarian community members stressed the potential economic gains from legal, large-scale cannabis production.

Members of the Rastafarian community said that while the Ministry of Education maintained enforcement of regulations requiring the vaccination of children to attend school, the government continued to provide waivers. 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 that some Rastafarians used continued to be a problem due to high costs.

Rastafarian community leaders said they continued to oppose COVID-19 vaccinations, but some engaged with government representatives to provide

information to those members who might choose vaccination – and to ensure continued access to religious waivers.

The government continued to consult with the Pentecostal Assemblies of the West Indies as well as the Christian Council (consisting of the Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and Methodist Churches, the Salvation Army, and the Evangelical Association of the Caribbean), on issues relevant to their communities, receiving support from some churches for its efforts to promote COVID-19-related public health measures from these leaders. After discussions with these organizations, the government reversed course in October and granted a religious exception to COVID-19 pandemic-related stay-at-home orders that it had applied on Sundays during much of the fourth quarter of the year.

The government continued its informal meetings with members of the Rastafarian community on pending legislation and policies, including certification of priests to sign marriage certificates and issues regarding required vaccinations for school attendance.

The government continued to consult with the Religious Affairs Council 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 member of the Islamic Association said that individuals generally demonstrated respect for the Muslim community but reports of verbal street harassment continued to appear on social media. One Rastafarian leader spoke positively of the “historic” impact on her community of the Prime Minister’s apology in parliament, describing the current status of Rastafarians as “unimaginable when I was growing up, when we were kept out of schools.”

The Christian Council continued to hold interdenominational meetings.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials discussed with government officials the priorities of the Religious Affairs Council, the status of the Islamic Association’s request for land and changes to burial laws, 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, Muslim, and Christian leaders on the importance of promoting freedom of religious expression and combating societal discrimination based on religion. The embassy promoted National Religious Freedom Day in January as well as Chinese Lunar New Year, Holi, Easter, and Ramadan on the embassy's Facebook and Twitter pages, underscoring the dangers of religious intolerance and stressing the economic and social benefits of protecting religious freedom.