

SAINT KITTS AND NEVIS 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The government continued to ban public marijuana usage except for registered places of worship of the Rastafarian religious community or any place authorized by the Prevention and Abatement of the Misuse and Abuse of Drugs Act. In November, Deputy Prime Minister Geoffrey Hanley received bipartisan support for the government's commitment to the Rastafarian community and to implement the 2019 court ruling allowing citizens to legally use marijuana in private spaces. In November, the National Assembly passed legislation granting the Evangelistic Faith Church legal standing and allowing it to own land. Under the previous government, the Islamic Association identified a lack of communication with government officials and expressed concerns regarding the fundamental understanding of burial rituals, availability of halal food, and health practitioners' awareness of Islamic norms.

The Saint Kitts and Nevis Christian Council, which includes the Anglican, Methodist, Moravian, and Roman Catholic Churches, the Salvation Army, and the Evangelical Association, including the Church of God and Pentecostal Assemblies, continued to promote joint activities encouraging tolerance in schools and the (religious) communities in both Saint Kitts and Nevis. The Evangelical Association of Saint Kitts publicly disapproved of the ruling of the High Court of Justice of the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court that ruled criminalization of same-sex consensual sexual activity was unconstitutional, quoting a responsibility to uphold the constitution.

U.S. embassy officials met with representatives of the government, including from the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, on issues of religious freedom, including the importance of respect for religious diversity and tolerance. During the year, embassy officials engaged with representatives of the evangelical Christian, Islamic, and Rastafarian communities. The embassy promoted National Religious Freedom Day, as well as Chinese Lunar New Year, Holi, Easter, and Ramadan on the embassy's official social media platforms.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 54,000 (midyear 2022). According to the U.S. government, 75.6 percent of the population is Protestant, 5.9 percent Catholic, and 1.3 percent Rastafarian. Jehovah's Witnesses are 1.4 percent; others are 8.8 percent and state no religious affiliation, and 0.1 percent of the population does not specify. There is also a small Muslim community on the island of Nevis.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom of individuals to change their religion. It prohibits discrimination based on religious belief.

The Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs is responsible for registering religious groups. Religious groups are not required to register but doing so provides the government with a database of contacts through which it disseminates information on government policy for religious groups. Registration also allows religious groups to act as charities and to import religious items duty-free.

The constitution allows religious groups to establish and maintain schools at the groups' own expense. Public schools offer Christian religious instruction, daily prayers, and religious assemblies. Students who do not want to attend are exempt from all religious activities. Public and private schools require vaccinations for children to attend school, but religious exemptions are permitted.

The law permits the private use of marijuana outside of public places, including for religious activities, as well as in registered spaces of worship for members of the Rastafarian faith. The law does not prohibit the wearing of dreadlocks; however, businesses may restrict the practice for safety or hygiene reasons. Occupational safety and health laws require all employees, including those with dreadlocks, to cover their hair when using dangerous equipment, handling food, or undertaking health-related activities.

According to enacted legislation, the evangelical community has legal standing and the right to own land.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

According to Protestant and evangelical Christian groups, the government took several actions to support and promote religious freedom and tolerance. Under the new government that came into office following national elections in early August, Prime Minister Drew designated Deputy Prime Minister Geoffrey Hanley as the government official responsible for Ecclesiastical and Faith-based Affairs.

In August, the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court ruled that the country's law criminalizing same-sex consensual sexual activity was unconstitutional. Religious leaders led by the Evangelical Association of Saint Kitts publicly disagreed with the case and submitted an affidavit signed by 30 religious officials, who argued in support of the constitution. They stated that the moral and religious fiber of the community should influence any interpretation of the constitution and to consider the issue from a biblical standing. The Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court ruled in favor of the defendant, decriminalizing same-sex consensual conduct between adults in Saint Kitts and Nevis, and it ordered the government to change its law on the subject in accordance with the ruling. By year's end, the government had not taken action to revise the law.

In November, the National Assembly passed legislation granting the Evangelistic Faith Church legal standing and allowing it to own land. The law also permitted religious organizations to sell or mortgage property as needed, as well as the ability to exchange property as needed. In October, Prime Minister Drew, along with members of the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank, celebrated 39 years of service to the region by participating in a worship service at the local Pentecostal Church.

According to the president of the Evangelical Association and media reports, faith-based organizations and religious leaders continued to be generally supportive of the government's policies and consultations with religious leaders.

The government continued its National School Chaplaincy Program for public and private schools. The Ministry of Health continued to require immunization of all children before enrolling in school but allowed waivers for unvaccinated Rastafarian children to attend public schools. Some children of the Rastafarian community were homeschooled.

Prison officials continued to allow Rastafarian prisoners to keep their dreadlocks unless they posed health-related issues or were used to transport contraband. The prison did not provide different diets based on prisoners' religious dietary restrictions.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Saint Kitts and Nevis Christian Council, which includes the Anglican, Methodist, Moravian, and Catholic Churches, the Salvation Army, and the Evangelical Association, including the Church of God and Pentecostal Assemblies, continued to promote joint activities that encouraged tolerance for religious diversity in schools.

The president of the Evangelical Association reported interfaith dialogue between his association and the Christian Council continued to focus on other topics, including local and general elections, intergovernmental conflicts, and a legal debate on the constitutionality of the country's law prohibiting same-sex consensual sexual activity.

The small Muslim community on the island of Nevis reported it maintained excellent relations with the Christian churches on the island and felt welcomed and supported, including being invited by Christians to share in holiday celebrations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials engaged government representatives from the previous and current governments, including officials from the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, on issues of religious freedom and the importance of respect for religious diversity and tolerance.

In April, embassy officials engaged with representatives of the Islamic Association in Nevis and discussed religious freedom in the country and opportunities for the promotion of religious equality. The embassy promoted National Religious Freedom Day in January, as well as the Chinese Lunar New Year, Holi, Easter, and Ramadan, on the embassy's official social media platforms.