

SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom of individuals to change their religion, and senior government officials publicly defended the right of religious freedom. Religious organizations may register as nonprofit religious institutions with the government or register as corporations, which requires an application to parliament. According to a government official, the Islamic Center of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which operates three mosques, was in the process of formally registering as an incorporated organization, the first Islamic organization to do so. In April the government presented the Drugs (Prevention of Misuse) Amendment Bill to parliament, which proposes to decriminalize possession and use of small amounts of marijuana. Senior government officials stated publicly that Rastafarians and Hindus could use cannabis for sacramental purposes. Rastafarians were among the first to receive government licenses to cultivate medical marijuana legally. The possibility of exemption from vaccinations required for school enrollment remained under discussion between Ministry of Health officials and Rastafarians with school-age children. Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs officials said it was difficult to convince Rastafarian leaders to meet with them to discuss their concerns.

Rastafarians said they still faced societal discrimination because of their religious practices but cited the legalization of medical marijuana as evidence of the continued increase in societal acceptance of and tolerance for Rastafarian culture and traditions.

U.S embassy officials continued to raise discrimination against Rastafarians because of the decision of some Rastafarians to wear their hair in dreadlocks with the Ministry of Education, Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information and with the Ministry of National Mobilization, Social Development, Family, Gender Affairs, Persons with Disabilities, and Youth. Embassy officials also met with individuals from the Christian, Muslim, and Rastafarian communities to discuss governmental and societal support for religious freedom, including respect for religious minorities. The embassy used Facebook to promote messages about 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 2019 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, 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 Muslims and Hindus, the latter primarily of East Indian origin.

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 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. An antiblasphemy law exists, but it is 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. By law, vaccinations are required for school enrollment in all schools receiving government funding. Home schooling is permitted.

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

According to the government, the Islamic Center of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which operates three mosques, was in the process of registering as a corporation, the first Islamic organization to do so. The group filed a petition with the Commercial and Intellectual Property Office to formally incorporate; the government continued to review the request at year's end.

In April clarifying amendments decriminalizing possession and use of small amounts of nonmedical marijuana were introduced in the Drugs (Prevention of Misuse) Amendment Bill, legislation that remained pending with parliament. Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves stated in an address to parliament that Rastafarians and Hindus were permitted to use cannabis for sacramental purposes. In July the government awarded Rastafarian cooperatives some of the first commercial licenses to cultivate marijuana.

The Ministry of Education, Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information said accommodations permitted dreadlocks for Rastafarians at some workplaces, including construction sites, with appropriate headgear called a Tam or Rastacap, which is similar to an elongated ski cap. Rastafarians, however, continued to encounter prohibitions on dreadlocks in certain work areas and in some private schools. In March Prime Minister Gonsalves and Attorney General Jaundy Marting publicly defended Rastafarians against religious discrimination, including regarding their use of dreadlocks. According to Rastafarians, vaccinations as a requirement for school enrollment remained an area of contention between Ministry of Health officials and Rastafarians with school-age children. Some Rastafarians said they decided to vaccinate their children; others chose homeschooling.

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. Some pointed out the recently approved legislation decriminalizing marijuana as proof of this

societal change. Rastafarians stated, however, they still faced discrimination in both private and public job markets due to their appearance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials continued to raise Rastafarian concerns about the prohibition of dreadlocks and the vaccination issue with the Ministry of National Mobilization, Social Development, Family, Gender Affairs, Persons with Disabilities, and Youth, as well as 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, with members of the Christian, Muslim, and Rastafarian 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.