

DOMINICA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including freedom of thought, freedom to practice one's religion, and freedom from oaths contrary to one's beliefs. Rastafarians said they continued to press the government to legalize marijuana use. In July Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit announced he would urge parliament to decriminalize marijuana for "medical, religious, and recreational use." Skerrit subsequently proposed the decriminalization of the possession of less than one ounce of marijuana, without mention of marijuana use for religious purposes. At year's end, the parliament was still considering the legislation. Representatives of the Rastafarian community reported authorities did not enforce the law prohibiting marijuana in their religious rites but called on the government to present the police force with clear guidelines to reduce potential public harassment of Rastafarians.

Interdenominational organizations worked to advance respect for religious freedom and diversity. In April the Dominica Christian Union Church hosted members of Christian denominations present in the country at its inaugural Christian Union Day. The Dominica Association of Evangelical Churches (DAEC) said it would continue to support the government's ban on same sex marriage based on its religious beliefs.

U.S. embassy officials raised religious freedom issues, including promoting interfaith understanding of different religious groups' beliefs and practices, confronting stereotypes, and finding common ground, with the government, including with the chief welfare officer of the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, Family, and Gender Affairs. Embassy representatives engaged religious leaders, including members of the Rastafarian community, members of the Dominica Christian Council, and the resident Roman Catholic bishop, on religious freedom issues, including freedom of religious expression and societal discrimination based on religion.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 74,100 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to data from the 2011 census, approximately 53 percent of the population is Catholic. Evangelical Protestants constitute approximately 20 percent of the population. The largest evangelical Protestant groups are

Pentecostals with 6 percent, Baptists with 5 percent, and the Christian Union Mission with 4 percent. Seventh-day Adventists constitute 7 percent of the population. Other smaller religious groups include Anglicans, Methodists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Rastafarians, and Baha'is. Nine percent of the population professes no religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including freedom of thought, freedom to practice one's religion, and freedom from taking oaths contrary to one's beliefs. By law, the government may make exceptions to constitutionally required provisions in the interests of public order and morality if the exceptions are for activities "shown not to be reasonably justifiable in a democratic society."

Religious groups seeking nonprofit status must register with the Attorney General's Office. They must submit a letter signed by five executives of the religious group and provide the official name of the religious group with an address identifying the place of worship. The registration fee is 25 Eastern Caribbean dollars (\$9). The Attorney General's Registry Office reviews and approves applications. Any organization denied permission to register has the right to apply for judicial review. By law, religious groups also must register buildings used to publish bans of marriage (announcements of marriage) or used as places of worship.

The constitution grants religious groups the right to establish and maintain private schools and to provide religious instruction. Students of different religions may attend private schools run by religious groups of another affiliation. Public schools may hold nondenominational prayers, and attendance is optional. The law requires the vaccination of all children to attend both public and private schools. Parents may homeschool their children.

Dreadlocks are prohibited in all government-funded schools.

The government requires vaccinations for all children enrolling in government-funded schools. The government does not offer a waiver for children without vaccinations.

Dreadlocks are prohibited in prisons.

The government imposes no legal regulations on foreign missionaries beyond the standard immigration laws for entering and remaining in the country.

The government prohibits the use of marijuana for any purpose, including for religious purposes.

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

Government Practices

In July Prime Minister Skerrit stated he would urge parliament to decriminalize marijuana for “medical, religious, and recreational use.” He subsequently proposed the decriminalization of the possession of less than one ounce of marijuana, without specific mention of marijuana use for religious purposes. During the year parliament continued consideration of Skerrit’s proposed legislation to decriminalize the possession of less than one ounce of marijuana, without mention of marijuana use for religious purposes. The legislation did not pass by year’s end.

Rastafarians continued to press the government for complete legalization of marijuana use, stating they considered decriminalization to be a commercially focused half measure. Representatives of the Rastafarian community again reported authorities did not enforce the law against using marijuana when they used it in their religious rites. Members of the Rastafarian community described their relationship with the government as “amicable.” There were no reports of police arrests of Rastafarians during the year in connection with marijuana for religious use. Rastafarian attorney Peter Alleyne called on the government to present the police force with clear guidelines in order to reduce potential public harassment of Rastafarians.

The Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, Family, and Gender Affairs again collaborated with the Christian community’s Interdenominational Committee on Crime and Violence in its work to reduce crime and provide opportunities for youth.

The government continued to subsidize teacher salaries at all private schools run by religious organizations, including those affiliated with the Catholic, Methodist, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches.

At public schools, teachers, principals, and students continued to lead nondenominational prayers during morning assemblies, but students were not required to participate.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Interdenominational organizations worked to advance respect for religious freedom and diversity. In April the Dominica Christian Union Church hosted members of Christian denominations from across the island at its inaugural Christian Union Day and invited the wider public. The DAEC periodically hosted large prayer gatherings to which the general public was regularly invited. DAEC and Roman Catholic representatives worked cooperatively to propose legislation to the government requesting the repeal of a law that prohibits any licensed clergy member from contesting an election. The DAEC said it would continue to support the government's ban on same sex marriage based on its religious beliefs and publicly characterized the LGBTI community as "inherently wrong."

Rastafarian community representatives said society had accepted Rastafarians. They said there were no incidents of discrimination.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials raised religious freedom, including promoting interfaith understanding of different religions' beliefs and practices, confronting stereotypes, and finding common ground, with the government, including with the chief welfare officer of the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, Family, and Gender Affairs. In August the embassy's Facebook page featured the "Voices of Religious Freedom."

Embassy representatives engaged religious leaders, including members of the Rastafarian community, members of the DAEC, and the resident Catholic bishop, on religious freedom issues, including freedom of religious expression and societal discrimination based on religion.