

BARBADOS 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws provide for freedom of religion, including the freedom to change one's religion, and prohibit discrimination based on religious belief. The government does not require religious groups to register and grants religious groups the right to establish and maintain private schools and provide religious instruction. No further legislative action occurred during the year on the government's 2020 announcement to legalize same-sex civil unions or on holding a referendum on same-sex marriage, but some religious groups continued to oppose the legislation, stating they were committed to following their beliefs and were opposed to the idea of their churches sanctioning same-sex relationships. Media reported sporadic small-scale protests, some organized by religious groups, opposing the legalization of same-sex unions. Most religious leaders continued to say COVID-19 public health restrictions on gatherings, although applied equally in the country, adversely impacted their organizations. Government officials engaged with religious leaders to support their public messaging to emphasize the importance of COVID-19 vaccinations. In March, the government decriminalized the personal possession and use of up to 14 grams of marijuana, a change the Rastafarian community had previously sought. Rastafarians continued to object to the government's vaccination requirement for school enrollment and for home schooling.

Some church leaders said they had to defend their continued provision of limited in-person services following COVID-19 outbreaks among their members because social and media criticism advocated for the complete closure of all facilities involving public gatherings, including places of worship. Following a sharp increase in COVID-19 infections, religious leaders called for all to pray to help reduce the surge.

During the year, embassy officials engaged government officials, including from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on respect for religious diversity and tolerance and discussed opportunities to jointly promote these values. On September 22, the Ambassador hosted an event with religious leaders to hear their perspectives on various social issues and to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their communities. Representatives from the Anglican, Pentecostal, Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, Church of the Nazarene, and Jewish communities participated.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 287,000 (midyear 2021). According to the most recent census in 2010, approximately 76 percent of the population is Christian, including Anglicans (23.9 percent of the total population), Pentecostals (19.5 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (5.9 percent), Methodists (4.2 percent), Roman Catholics (3.8 percent), Wesleyans (3.4 percent), Church of the Nazarenes (3.2 percent), and the Church of God (2.4 percent). Religious groups with 2 percent or less of the population each include Baptists, Moravians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other religious groups, together constituting less than 3 percent of the population, include Muslims, Jews, Rastafarians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Baha'is. Approximately 21 percent of respondents do not identify a religious affiliation. According to the leader of the Jewish community, many Jews are part-time residents or periodic visitors to the country.

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, and the prohibition of discrimination based on creed. A law criminalizing "blasphemous libel" is not enforced.

The government requires religious groups to register only to obtain duty-free import privileges and tax benefits. A religious group must file the relevant customs and tax forms with the Corporate Affairs and Intellectual Property Office, along with a resolution passed by a majority of its board of trustees expressly authorizing the application, plus the group's related statutory declaration.

The constitution grants religious groups the right to establish and maintain private schools and provide religious instruction. The government provides subsidies or financial assistance to some of these schools to help cover the cost of students who could not find space in a public school. The public school curriculum includes religious "values education" as part of the historic association of schools with Christian missionaries, who founded many of the schools. At the primary school level, the focus of religious instruction is nondenominational Christianity. At the secondary school level, all major religions are included. The constitution protects students from mandatory religious instruction, ceremony, or observance without personal consent or, if younger than 21, consent of parents or guardians.

By law, vaccinations for certain diseases are required for all school-age children attending both public and private schools, as well as those who are homeschooled. There are no exceptions for religious beliefs. The vaccination program is administered through the Ministry of Health, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education. Homeschooled children must be registered with the Ministry of Education.

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

Government Practices

No further legislative action occurred during the year on the government's 2020 announcement to legalize same-sex civil unions or on holding a referendum on same-sex marriage, but some religious groups, including Anglican, Pentecostal and Seventh Day Adventists, continued to oppose the legislation. These organizations said there was a growing social acceptance of same-sex relationships, but said they were committed to following their beliefs and were opposed to the idea of their churches sanctioning same-sex relationships. Media reported sporadic small-scale protests, some organized by religious groups opposing the legalization of same-sex unions. In 2020, the government announced it would legalize same-sex civil unions, a decision criticized by most religious leaders.

To control COVID infections, the government continued to limit public gatherings, including attendance at in-person church services based on a church's physical capacity. Most religious leaders continued to say that COVID-19 public health restrictions on gatherings, although applied equally in the country, adversely impacted their organization's finances, limited their ability to conduct in-person services, and hampered their membership growth prospects. Several religious organizations reported they had successfully implemented online services to offset the public gathering limits. A leader of the Jewish community said that her organization connected with new members by conducting online services. Government officials continued to engage with religious leaders to support their public messaging to emphasize the importance of COVID-19 vaccinations.

In March, with the stated intention of making better use of police and court resources, among other reasons, the government decriminalized the personal possession and use of up to 14 grams of marijuana, a change in the law that the Rastafarian community supported. According to media, Attorney General Dale

Marshall said that cannabis possession of 14 grams or fewer would result in a fine rather than criminal charges.

Rastafarians continued to object to the government's vaccination requirement for school enrollment.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders representing the Anglican, Pentecostal, and Seventh-day Adventists churches, among others, acknowledged the growing social acceptance of same-sex relationships but said they were committed to following their beliefs and were opposed to the idea of their churches sanctioning same sex relationships.

Following a sharp increase in COVID-19 infections that threatened the medical system's capacity, religious leaders called for all to pray to help reduce the surge.

Some church leaders said they had to defend their continued provision of limited in-person services following COVID-19 outbreaks among their members. Church leaders said that following these outbreaks, social and media criticism called for the complete closure of all facilities involving public gatherings, including places of worship.

The Anglican Church provided space for a shelter for victims of abuse, regardless of religious affiliation or belief.

Most religious leaders said they were not seeing growth in their membership and were concerned that the demographic profile of their membership continued to skew to older individuals.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss respect for religious diversity and tolerance and how to further advance these values. On September 22, the Ambassador hosted an event with religious leaders to discuss their communities' activities and hear their religious perspectives on social issues and on the proposed legislation to allow same-sex civil unions. Representatives from the Anglican, Pentecostal, Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, Church of the Nazarene, and Jewish communities participated. The Ambassador inquired about the religious organizations' involvement in and advocacy for other

social issues such as alleviating poverty and protecting vulnerable members of society.

The embassy promoted National Religious Freedom Day and extended greetings on Chinese Lunar New Year, Holi, Easter, and Ramadan via the embassy's official social media platforms.