

ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of worship as well as the right to practice and change one's religion. Rastafarians continued to express concern that some government practices – prohibition of marijuana use, required vaccination for entry to public schools, and headdress restrictions at the airport or in court where removal of the headdress is considered necessary for security reasons – negatively impacted their religious activities and convictions. Some Rastafarians said they continued to be subjected to undue scrutiny at security checkpoints that those of other religions did not experience.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officials engaged representatives of the government and civil society on religious freedom issues, including the importance of respect for religious diversity. They discussed issues involving government facilitation of religious diversity and tolerance and equal treatment under the law, including marriage ceremonies within the community, recognition of doctors and required vaccination of children entering the school system, and school curricula regarding religion.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 95,000 (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 17.6 percent of the population is Anglican, 12.4 percent Seventh-day Adventist, 12.2 percent Pentecostal, 8.3 percent Moravian, 8.2 percent Roman Catholic, and 5.6 percent Methodist. Those with unspecified or no religious beliefs account for 5.5 percent and 5.9 percent of the population, respectively. Members of the Baptist Church, the Church of God, and the Wesleyan Holiness Consortium each account for less than 5 percent. The census categorizes an additional 12.2 percent of the population as belonging to other religious groups, including Rastafarians, Muslims, Hindus, and Bahais, without providing percentages for each group. According to anecdotal information, these four religious groups are listed from largest to smallest.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of worship as well as the right to change and practice the religion of one's choosing. The constitution protects individuals from taking oaths contradictory to their beliefs or participating in events and activities of religions not their own, including participating in or receiving unwanted religious education. These freedoms may be limited in the interests of defense or public safety, order, morality or health, or to protect the rights of others, unless actions under such limitations can be shown "not to be reasonably justifiable in a democratic society." The constitution prohibits members of the clergy from running for elected office. No law may be adopted that contradicts these constitutional provisions. The government does not enforce a law outlawing blasphemous language in a public place or any other place that would "cause annoyance to the public."

The government does not require religious groups to register; however, in order to receive tax and duty-free concessions and to own, build, or renovate property, religious groups must register with the government. To register, religious groups must fill out an online tax form that determines the group's activities and the corresponding taxes. The completed form is submitted to the Inland Revenue Department for review and approval. Registration and tax statuses are routinely granted.

Public schools do not allow religious instruction. Private religious schools may provide religious instruction. The government does not provide subsidies to private schools. Public schools require parents to immunize their children to attend school; however, some schools waive the requirement based on the religious beliefs of the family. Some private schools do not require immunizations for their students. The law also permits home schooling.

Occupational health regulations require individuals with dreadlocks to cover their hair when they work with food, hazardous equipment, or in the health sector. These regulations apply to both public- and private-sector workplaces.

The law prohibits the use of marijuana, including for religious purposes.

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

Government Practices

A representative of the Rastafarian community continued to state that the government's prohibition of marijuana restricted the right to practice their religion because marijuana was integral to their religious rituals. The representative stated the government engaged with the community on this issue.

A Rastafarian representative said Rastafarians disagreed with the public school requirement that children be vaccinated, which he stated was against the religious beliefs of Rastafarians. He said some Rastafarian children received exemptions requiring immunizations to enter school or attended private schools not requiring immunizations. He stated that some other Rastafarians chose to home school their children.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials engaged officials from the Department of Gender Affairs in the Ministry of Social Services and Community Development as well as the police to emphasize the importance of respect for religious diversity and equal treatment under the law.

Embassy officials also met with representatives from the Christian Council, the Muslim community, and the Rastafarian community to discuss religious freedom issues, including the importance of freedom of religious expression and discrimination on the basis of religion. The embassy also used Facebook to promote messages about the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity across the Eastern Caribbean.