



Dominican Republic

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country, which occupies two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola, has an area of 18,815 square miles and a population of 9.7 million. The largest religious group is the Roman Catholic Church. Traditional Protestants, evangelical Christian groups (particularly Assemblies of God, Church of God, Baptists, and Pentecostals), Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) have a much smaller but generally growing presence. According to a 2006 population survey by the Gallup Organization, the population is 39.8 percent Catholic (practicing), 29.1 percent Catholic (nonpracticing), and 18.2 percent evangelical Protestant. In the same study, 10.6 percent stated they had no religion. The Dominican Confederation of Evangelical Unity claims evangelicals represent 16 to 20 percent of the population.

There are approximately 300 Jews. Most live in Santo Domingo, which has a synagogue and a community leader but no ordained rabbi. There is a synagogue for the small Jewish community in Sosua. Both synagogues are led by the same individual. Government sources estimate there are between 5,000 and 10,000 Muslims, a figure that includes many foreign students. A Sunni mosque in Santo Domingo has approximately 500 regular worshippers. There is a small number of Buddhists and Hindus. Some Catholics practice a combination of Catholicism and Afro-Caribbean beliefs (santeria), witchcraft (brujeria), or voodoo (vodou), but because these practices are usually concealed, the number of adherents is unknown.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

While the Constitution specifies that there is no state church and provides for freedom of religion and belief, the Government signed a concordat in 1954 with the Vatican, which designates Catholicism as the official religion and

extends special privileges to the Catholic Church not granted to other religious groups. These include the legal recognition of church law, use of public funds to underwrite some church expenses, such as rehabilitation of church facilities, and a complete exoneration from customs duties. In 2008, the Government informed the Catholic Church that it would assume most of the cost of building a new cathedral and religious sanctuary complex in Bayaguana, but after obtaining the site, placed construction on hold due to lack of funds.

The Government observes Epiphany, Our Lady of Altagracia Day, Good Friday, Corpus Christi, Our Lady of Mercedes Day, and Christmas as national holidays.

Religious groups are required to register with the Government. Religious groups other than the Catholic Church may request exoneration from customs duties from the Office of the Presidency. This process can be lengthy; however, no requests for customs exoneration were denied during the reporting period. Evangelical Protestant leaders regularly urged the Government to provide their churches with privileges equivalent to those granted to the Catholic Church and proposed a law to that effect; at the end of the reporting period the law was pending. Catholic weddings are the only religious wedding ceremonies that the Government recognizes.

In October 2008, the Supreme Court denied the constitutional challenge brought in 2006 by the Ministerio Jesús es Sanidad y Vida Eterna (Jesus is Health and Life Eternal Ministry), an evangelical Christian organization, of the concordat between the state and the Vatican. The Supreme Court ruled the concordat did not bar other religious groups from receiving the same benefits granted to the Catholic Church under the concordat.

The law requires the Bible be read in public schools, but it was not enforced. Private schools are exempt from this requirement.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy met with leaders of various religious communities, including those of minority groups.