



## Dominican Republic

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

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 period covered by this report.

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 9.4 million. The largest religious group is the Roman Catholic Church. Traditional Protestants, evangelical Christians (particularly Assembly 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 (CODUE) claims that 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.

Various government sources estimate that there are between 5,000 and 10,000 Muslims, a figure that includes many foreign students. There is an active Sunni mosque in Santo Domingo, with approximately 300 regular worshippers. There is a small number of Buddhists and Hindus. Some Catholics practice a combination of Catholicism and Afro-Caribbean beliefs (santería), witchcraft (brujería), or voodoo (vodou), but because these practices are usually concealed, the number of adherents is unknown.

#### Section II. Status of 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. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

While the Constitution specifies that there is no state church and allows the freedom of religion and belief, the

Government signed a concordat in 1954 with the Vatican, designating Catholicism as the official religion and extending to the Catholic Church special privileges 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 January 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. Some estimated the religious sanctuary would cost approximately 12 million dollars (RD 400 million pesos), with the cathedral costing more than 3 million dollars (RD 100 million pesos).

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 tax exoneration were denied during the period covered by this report. Evangelical Protestant leaders regularly urged the Government to provide their churches privileges equivalent to those granted to the Catholic Church. Catholic weddings are the only religious wedding ceremonies that the Government recognizes.

The Supreme Court had not acted further on the complaint brought in July 2006 by the Ministerio Jesús es Sanidad y Vida Eterna (Jesus is Health and Life Eternal Ministries), an evangelical Christian organization, challenging the constitutionality of the concordat between the state and the Vatican. On February 21, 2008, the organization demonstrated outside the Supreme Court to protest the delay. In August 2006 the Office of the Attorney General recommended that the constitutional challenge be denied.

The law requires that 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 period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees 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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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.

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