

DOMINICA 2023 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 taking oaths contrary to one's beliefs.

The Dominica Association of Evangelical Churches (DAEC) continued to advocate repeal a provision in the constitution banning licensed clergy from running for office. It also continued to work with the Office of the Attorney General on the committee for the legalization of medicinal cannabis. A member of an evangelical Protestant group stated that government officials often signaled displeasure when the religious group's views on national issues were not aligned with government views. Rastafarians continued to press the government to fully legalize marijuana use for religious purposes.

The DAEC reported it maintained good relations with the public and other religious denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church. DAEC members also engaged in social programs and hosted a radio program where a diverse range of religious and government official speakers were invited to present multiple socioeconomic topics from varying religious perspectives. Interdenominational organizations continued their efforts to advance respect for religious freedom and diversity. Interdenominational dialogue between Catholic and Protestant communities continued.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The ambassador and representatives from the U.S. Embassy in Bridgetown,

Barbados visited the country frequently and engaged with government officials on issues of religious freedom. Embassy officials met with an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Business, Trade and Energy to discuss issues of religious freedom. They also met with evangelical Protestant and Catholic leaders, and members of the Rastafarian community to discuss the state of religious freedom and human rights in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 74,656 (midyear 2023). According to the U.S. government, Catholics represent 52.7 percent of the population, Protestants 29.7 percent, Rastafarians 1.1 percent, Jehovah's Witnesses 1.3 percent, and those listing "other" 4.3 percent; 9.4 percent report no religious affiliation, and 1.4 percent are unspecified. According to the U.S. government, the largest evangelical Protestant groups are Seventh-day Adventists with approximately 7 percent, Pentecostals, with approximately 6 percent, Baptists, with approximately 5 percent, and the Christian Union Mission, with approximately 4 percent. According to the most recent national census in 2011, approximately 53 percent of the population is Catholic, and evangelical Protestants constitute approximately 20 percent of the population. Other smaller religious groups include Anglicans, Methodists, Muslims, Spiritists, Ethnic Religionists, Buddhists, Chinese folk-religionists, Hindus, Rastafarians, and Baha'is.

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 reasonable exceptions to constitutionally required provisions in the interests of defense, public safety, public order, public morality, and public health.

The constitution prohibits a minister of a religion from running for office.

Religious groups seeking nonprofit status must register with the Office of the Attorney General. They must submit a letter signed by five executives of the religious group and provide the official name of the group and an address identifying the place of worship. There is no minimum number of members required to register a religious group. 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 marriage banns (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. The law requires the vaccination (non-COVID-19) of all children to attend both public and private schools. The government does not offer a waiver for children without vaccinations. Parents may homeschool their children.

Dreadlocks are prohibited in all government-funded schools as well as in prisons; however, the law is not enforced.

By law, registered religious groups may import vehicles and equipment without paying customs duties for their use. To receive this benefit, they must submit in writing to the customs office a request to receive duty-free concessions and provide their tax code. The customs office reserves the right to determine the number of vehicles per application that can receive duty-free concessions. To receive duty-free concessions for religious equipment, the process is the same, except that the application is first vetted by the customs office's cultural division. Religious organizations may also obtain concessions on building materials when constructing religious buildings.

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

Government Practices

The DAEC continued to advocate the repeal of a provision in the constitution prohibiting licensed clergy from running for public office. Its members engaged in the public consultation on electoral reform, including by submitting a letter to advocate changing the law to permit religious leaders to run for office.

A member of an evangelical Protestant group stated that government officials often signaled displeasure when the religious group's views on national issues were not aligned with government views.

Rastafarians continued to press the government for complete legalization of marijuana for religious purposes following the decriminalization of possession of less than one ounce of marijuana in 2020; unlimited use and cultivation remained illegal.

During the year, the DAEC continued to work with the Office of the Attorney General on the committee for the legalization of medicinal cannabis and the committee for disaster relief.

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.

Rastafarians reported that the government continued to request they register as a religious organization due to their numbers. Rastafarians, however, said they did not want to officially register because they considered Rastafari a “livity,” which Rastafarians define as a balanced lifestyle focused on natural food consumption and growth of natural hair and not a religion as defined by the government.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The DAEC reported they maintained a good relationship with the public and other religious denominations, including the Catholic Church. They also reported that Rastafarians occasionally used their church buildings to conduct funerals.

DAEC members engaged in social programs and hosted a radio program where a diverse range of religious and government official speakers were

invited to discuss topics such as leadership, finance, and electoral reform, from a range of religious perspectives.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The ambassador and representatives from the U.S. Embassy in Bridgetown, Barbados visited the country frequently and engaged with government officials on issues of religious freedom.

Embassy officials continued their engagement on religious freedom issues. They met with an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Business, Trade and Energy to discuss issues of religious freedom.

Embassy officials also met with evangelical Protestant and Catholic leaders, and members of the Rastafarian community to discuss the state of religious freedom and human rights in the country.

The embassy maintained social media engagement on religious freedom, including publishing greetings on religious holidays and calling for respect for religious freedom. Specifically, the embassy promoted International Holocaust Remembrance Day as well as messages on Good Friday, Easter, and Ramadan on the embassy's official social media platforms.