

# DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and belief. A concordat with the Holy See designates Roman Catholicism as the official state religion and extends special privileges to the Catholic Church not granted to other religious groups. These include funding for church expenses, including administration and construction, visa exceptions, and exemptions for customs duties for church officials.

Members of non-Catholic groups continued to voice concerns regarding the government's preference for the Catholic Church, the lack of explicit legal protection for non-Catholic churches beyond what the constitution provides, and the treatment of non-Catholic churches as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). According to religious observers, neither the national government nor congress took significant steps to change the existing legal framework covering this subject. Members of non-Catholic groups highlighted the growth of non-Catholic denominations and their contributions to the country to support their call for more equal access, benefits, and recognition by the government.

According to religious groups and human rights advocates, the practice of Catholicism and celebration of Catholic holidays continued to play a significant role in the country's culture, and Catholic traditions were deeply intertwined with many aspects of life, including in government and politics, marriage, family gatherings, social services, and education, among others. Non-Catholic groups continued to promote diversity and religious freedom. The Interfaith Dialogue Coalition, comprising members of all major Protestant church councils, continued to work together and with other religious groups to assist vulnerable communities, including Haitian migrants, regardless of the religious affiliations of members of those communities.

U.S. embassy officials engaged government and civil society leaders on issues of religious freedom, including equal treatment of Catholic and non-Catholic groups under the law and the ability of parents to decide for their children whether they partake in religious activities in school. The Chargé d'Affaires and other embassy

representatives engaged officials from the Catholic Church, the Dominican Evangelical Fellowship, the Evangelical Church, and the Sosua Jewish Museum and Sosua Synagogue. Such interactions provided the opportunity to discuss religious freedom issues and any perceived societal or governmental challenges to their constituencies' free exercise of religion.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.7 million (midyear 2022). According to a 2020 Latinobarometer survey, the population is 52.5 percent Catholic, compared with 55 percent in a 2016 Latinobarometer survey and 68 percent in 2008. The 2020 survey indicated over 21 percent of the population is evangelical Protestant, compared with 12 percent in 2008. The 2020 survey also determined that nearly 22 percent of the population has no declared religion. Other faiths include Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and nonevangelical Protestants. According to Pastor Dioris (Dio) Astacio, Protestant liaison to President Luis Abinader, there are two million Protestants in the country.

According to representatives of the Muslim community, there are approximately 3,000 to 4,000 Muslims throughout the country. Jewish leaders state that most of the approximately 350 members of the Jewish community live in Santo Domingo, with a small community in Sosua. There are also small numbers of Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is.

Most Haitian immigrants are Christians, including evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and Seventh-day Adventists. An unknown number of Haitians practice Voodoo or other Afro-Caribbean beliefs such as Santería.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of "conscience and worship, subject to public order and respect for social norms." A 1954 concordat with the Holy See designates Catholicism as the official state religion and extends special privileges to the Catholic Church not granted to other religious groups. These include the

special protection of the state in the exercise of Catholic ministry, exemption of Catholic clergy from military service, permission to provide Catholic instruction in public orphanages, public funding to underwrite some church expenses, and exemption from customs duties. Nationally recognized holidays also include days that are traditionally only observed by Catholics.

To request exemption from customs duties, non-Catholic groups must first register as NGOs with the Attorney General's Office and the Ministry of Finance. Registration with the Attorney General's Office is a two-step process. The group must provide documentation of a fixed address and the names of seven elected officers, have a minimum of 25 members, and pay a nominal fee. The group must also draft and submit statutes and provide copies of government-issued identification documents for the board of directors. After registering, religious groups request customs duty exemption status from the Ministry of Finance, which does not always grant it.

Only marriages performed by religious groups registered with the Central Electoral Board are legally recognized. To register, the law requires churches to have legal status and be present in the country for at least five years, provide a membership list, and train clergy on how to perform marriages. Churches are responsible for determining the legal qualification of couples as the law prohibits same-sex marriages as well as marriages for persons younger than 18; churches must record all marriages in the civil registry within three working days of the marriage. According to the law, failure to comply with these regulations may result in a misdemeanor charge, including 100 pesos (\$2) for each day beyond the recording deadline, suspension of a marriage license, or up to five years in prison.

The concordat grants the Catholic Church full access to prisons and the Catholic Church is the only religious group legally guaranteed access to prisoners. Prisoners of all faiths have the right to practice their religion under a new law on the regulation of penitentiary and correctional systems, which went into effect in 2021. The 2021 law establishes freedom of religion for all prisoners, while also allowing the Catholic Church to have a representative in every prison. According to the law, discrimination toward prisoners based on their religion is prohibited. The law affirms the right of prisoners to receive religious services and seek counseling from officiants of their faith.

The concordat and a biblical studies law require that religious studies based in either Catholic or evangelical Protestant teachings be taught in all elementary and secondary public schools. Parents, however, may excuse their children from the course. Private schools are exempt from the biblical studies requirement, although private schools run by religious groups may opt to teach religious studies. The biblical studies law also mandates public schools read the Bible at the beginning of each day after the national anthem, although this was not enforced.

Foreign missionaries may obtain a one-year, multiple-entry business visa through the Ministry of Foreign Relations after submitting proof of their affiliation with the relevant religious institution in the country. Foreign missionaries may renew their visa before the original one-year visa has expired.

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

### **Government Practices**

Non-Catholic groups continued to state that the government provided the Catholic Church significant financial support and other benefits unavailable to them, including transferring properties to the Catholic Church, providing monetary assistance for the Catholic Church to build new places of worship, and giving subsidies to support salaries of church officials. They expressed dissatisfaction with the government's preference for the Catholic Church, the lack of explicit legal protection for religious groups beyond what the constitution provides, and the treatment under the law of non-Catholic groups as NGOs rather than as religious organizations.

While other denominations were allowed access to prisons, the Catholic Church was the only one authorized to maintain full-time representation in every prison.

Protestant leaders continued to say that, in order to be more responsive to all religious groups, the government should open a department of religious affairs instead of working through liaisons to different Christian denominations. According to some civil society organizations, they were concerned that some religious groups, mainly Catholics, exerted too much influence in politics and

government, thereby limiting the ability of non-Catholic groups to advance their own priorities.

Starting in July, Congress debated a bill to reform the country's penal code. This was an updated version of an earlier penal code bill that was introduced in 2020 but failed to pass. Among the provisions of the 2022 draft bill was an article prohibiting discrimination in employment, service provision, and other spheres, and listing several social categories protected against discrimination, including religion. The list of protected categories did not include gender identity or sexual orientation. Critics said the draft bill would allow discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons and other marginalized communities because they were not included in the bill as protected social categories. The draft code was largely supported by Catholic and Protestant churches.

According to the National Statistics Office, of the 45,292 marriages registered in 2021, over 90 percent were civil marriages, while approximately 5 percent were Catholic and 5 percent a mixture of other denominations.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

According to civil society organizations, Catholicism, Catholic practices, and Catholic holidays played a significant role in the country's culture, and Catholic traditions were deeply intertwined with many aspects of life, including government and politics, marriage, family gatherings, social services, and education, among others.

Some non-Catholic religious leaders sought to promote societal change by helping the population understand and value religious freedom and the right to freely practice one's religious beliefs. Because of what they termed to be the entrenched position of Catholicism in the country, representatives of some non-Catholic religious groups said governmental and societal discrimination against non-Catholic groups would likely continue.

The Interfaith Dialogue Coalition, comprising members of all major Protestant church councils, continued to work together and with other religious groups to

assist vulnerable communities, including Haitian migrants, regardless of the religious affiliations of members of those communities.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The Chargé and other embassy representatives engaged government officials, including from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and civil society leaders regarding issues of religious freedom, including the need for equal treatment of Catholic and non-Catholic groups under the law and the ability of parents to decide for their children whether they partake in religious activities in school.

The Chargé and other embassy representatives engaged officials from the Catholic Church, the Dominican Evangelical Fellowship, the Evangelical Church, and the Sosua Jewish Museum and Sosua Synagogue. Such interactions provided the opportunity to discuss religious freedom issues and any perceived societal or governmental challenges to their constituencies' free exercise of religion.

The embassy continued to support Holocaust remembrance and education initiatives through grants to the Sosua Jewish Museum and to two U.S. institutions to support the museum's efforts to preserve and digitalize museum archives that told the story of Jewish refugees who immigrated to the country after fleeing Nazi persecution.