

SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom of individuals to change their religion. Religious organizations may register as nonprofit religious institutions with the government or register as corporations, the latter option requiring an application to parliament.

During the year, the government registered two new religious groups and met regularly with representatives of existing registered religious groups to, among other issues, reinforce the importance of respecting religious freedom while enforcing necessary public health measures. The government continued to provide exemptions from COVID-19 vaccinations on a case-by-case basis to educators based on religious belief. A Rastafarian leader expressed concern that other public sector employers terminated Rastafarian public sector workers for refusing to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

Rastafarians said they were increasingly accepted in society, and overall, the country's citizens were becoming more tolerant of their way of life, including their use of cannabis.

The U.S. Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials continued to underscore with government officials, including with Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves, the need to respect all religious groups and protect religious freedom as a fundamental right. Embassy officials also met with individuals from the Christian, Muslim, and Rastafarian communities and nongovernmental organizations to discuss governmental and societal support for religious freedom, including respect for religious minorities. The embassy used social media and its website to promote messages regarding the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity in the country and across the Eastern Caribbean.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 167,000 (midyear 2022). According to the 2012 government census, the most recent, 82.3 percent of the

population identifies as Christian, among them Pentecostals composing 27.6 percent, Anglicans 13.9 percent, Seventh-day Adventists 11.6 percent (including Thusia Seventh-day Adventists), Baptists 8.9 percent, Methodists 8.7 percent, and Roman Catholics 6.3 percent. There are also followers of the Assemblies of Yahweh and of Life by Faith Ministries. Individuals with no religious affiliation account for 7.5 percent; those listed as “no religion stated” constitute 4.7 percent; and those listed as “other religion” constitute 4.3 percent. Rastafarians account for 1.1 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Muslims and Hindus, the latter primarily of East Indian origin. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reports it has 715 members (0.7 percent of the population), a slight decrease from the previous year. There are also small Jewish and Baha’i Faith communities.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution affirms the country “is founded on the belief in the supremacy of God.” The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, including freedom of thought and of religion and the freedom of an individual to change his or her religion or belief. In addition, individuals have the freedom to practice their religion, either alone or in community with others, both in public and in private. The criminal code criminalizes “blasphemous” or “profane” speech “in any public place,” punishable by a three-month prison term, but these provisions are not enforced.

The constitution permits freedom of association, and there are no regulations regarding freedom to organize and worship. Religious organizations may, but are not required to, register as nonprofit religious institutions with the Ministry of Education, National Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information to qualify for tax exemptions. Religious organizations may also register as corporations, requiring an application to the same ministry and the issuance of a certificate of incorporation by parliament.

The constitution grants religious groups the right to establish schools and provide religious instruction to those wishing to receive it. Students in public schools receive nondenominational religious instruction based on Christianity. Christian

prayers are recited at school assemblies, although attendance and participation are not mandatory. Students wishing to opt out of Christian prayer or religious education classes are excused from participation. Religious observance exemptions are allowed under the constitution's nondiscrimination clause. These include exemptions from vaccinations for staff and students on religious grounds. The law permits homeschooling.

Possession and use of two ounces or fewer of marijuana is decriminalized, including for religious rites.

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

Government Practices

According to government officials, there were 147 religious groups, with approximately 500 registered religious nonprofit organizations representing various denominations. Because registration requires financial reporting that some groups found onerous, many religious organizations did not register. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, government officials reported receiving an average of 12 applications per year, primarily from already registered organizations establishing new branches or changing their organizational structures. During the year, the government registered only two new religious groups due to the country's ongoing recovery from COVID-19, and government officials met regularly with representatives of existing registered religious groups to discuss respect for religious freedom while enforcing and observing required public health measures.

Public sector employees, including those associated with certain religious groups, whom public sector employers had dismissed in accordance with a 2021 public health law mandating COVID-19 vaccination for some categories of public sector workers, continued to protest the law, both as individuals and through the country's public sector unions. The government continued to provide exemptions on a case-by-case basis to educators based on religious belief. Data for other public sector employees was not available because the government did not keep these records. The exemptions included followers of Life by Faith Ministries, Nyabinghi Order (a Rastafarian group), Thusia Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the Assemblies of Yahweh. A Rastafarian leader, however, expressed concern

that other public sector employers terminated Rastafarian employees for refusing COVID-19 vaccinations. The Rastafarian employees said they believed they were exempt from the requirement based on their religious beliefs.

According to government officials, during the year, the Ministry of Education, National Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information again approved religious exemptions from the vaccination requirement for school enrollment, a requirement that Rastafarians and Thusia Seventh-day Adventists opposed. Government officials also said the ministry interpreted the constitution's nondiscrimination clauses to include protecting the right of Rastafarians and Thusia Seventh-day Adventists to wear dreadlocks in schools.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Rastafarians continued to say they were accepted in society, and overall, the country's citizens were becoming more tolerant of their way of life – especially regarding their traditional cultivation of cannabis. As a result of the decriminalization of possession of small amounts of marijuana for personal use, observers said there was widespread and increasing use of cannabis on the country's main island, which they believed suggested broader societal acceptance of its use. One leading community member described non-Rastafarian Vincentians as “tolerant” of their cultural and religious practices.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to underscore with government officials, including Prime Minister Gonsalves, Minister of Finance Camillo Gonsalves, Leader of the Opposition Godwin Friday, and others, the need to continue respecting all religious groups and to protect religious freedom as a fundamental right.

Embassy officials also discussed governmental and societal support for religious freedom, including respect for religious minorities, in meetings with members of Christian, Muslim, and Rastafarian groups and with nongovernmental organizations.

The embassy used Twitter, Facebook, and its website to promote messages regarding the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity across the Eastern Caribbean. The embassy promoted National Religious Freedom Day in January as well as Chinese Lunar New Year, Holi, Easter, and Ramadan on the embassy's Facebook and Twitter pages. To mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the embassy messaged that "the shadows of 80 years ago still lurk today," and it underscored the United States' shared "responsibility to safeguard the values of freedom, tolerance, respect, and transparency."