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Dominican Republic

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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 from customs duties for church officials.

Members of non-Catholic groups reiterated concerns regarding the government's preferential treatment of 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 with respect to non-Catholic religious groups. 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, an...

others. Dominican civil society, including members of various faiths, continued to support religious freedom and diversity. 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. The Catholic Church also continued to assist migrants and others in marginalized communities while promoting tolerance for religious diversity and freedom in the country.

The Chargé and other U.S. embassy representatives engaged government officials, including officials from the Presidential Palace; diplomats, including the Papal Nuncio; and civil society leaders regarding issues of religious freedom, including the need for equal treatment of all religious groups under the law. The Chargé and other embassy representatives also engaged officials from the Catholic Church, the Dominican Evangelical Fellowship, the Evangelical Church, the Sosua Jewish Museum, and the Israelite Center of the Dominican Republic. Such interactions provided the opportunity to discuss religious freedom issues and any perceived societal or governmental obstacles to their constituencies' free exercise of religion.

Section I.

Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.8 million (midyear 2023). According to a series of surveys by Pew and Latinobarometro conducted since 2014, Catholics comprise more than 50 percent of the population, evangelical Protestants between 20 and 30 percent, and approximately 18 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, nonevangelical Protestants, Judaism, and Islam.

According to representatives of the Muslim community, there are several thousand Muslims throughout the country. Jewish leaders state most of the approximately 400 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. An unknown number of Dominicans incorporate syncretic beliefs, such as Santeria, in their religious practices.

There are an estimated 500,000 Haitians in the country, according to the 2017 National Immigrant Survey. Most Haitians are Christians, including Catholics, evangelical Protestants,

and Seventh-day Adventists. An unknown number practice Voodoo or other Afro-Caribbean beliefs such as Santeria.

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 observed only 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 its board of directors. After registering, religious groups may 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 of 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 Church is the only religious group legally guaranteed access to prisoners. The government assigns a Catholic priest to every prison and pays his salary. Prisoners of all faiths have the right to practice their religion under a law on the regulation of penitentiary and correctional systems. The 2021 law establishes freedom of religion for all prisoners and prohibits discrimination toward prisoners based on their religion. The law affirms the right of prisoners to receive religious services and seek counseling from officials of their faith. Representatives of non-Catholic groups can access prisons upon request.

The concordat and a biblical studies law require religious studies based in either Catholic or evangelical Protestant teachings be taught in all elementary and secondary public schools, but religious observers indicate the law is not enforced and religious studies are largely optional, with parents able to choose whether their children take the courses. Private schools are exempt from the biblical studies requirement, although private schools run by religious groups may choose to teach religious studies. The biblical studies law also mandates public schools read a passage from the Bible at the beginning of each day after the national anthem, although this is 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 again said the government provided the Catholic Church significant financial support and other benefits unavailable to them, including transferring public 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 lack of explicit legal protection for non-Catholic groups beyond what the constitution provides and the treatment under the law of non-Catholic groups as NGOs rather than as religious organizations. According to religious observers, neither the executive branch nor congress took significant steps to change the existing legal framework with respect to non-Catholic religious groups. 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.

Catholic priests often served as chaplains in the military and national police and clergy from other faiths could also serve in these functions.

Religious groups underscored their desire to be seen as partners of the state, not clients, noting the undue burden that the law and regulations place on non-Catholic churches' ability to operate, including their ability to provide services and assistance to vulnerable populations.

Some religious groups said that to be more responsive to all religious groups, the government should open an office of religious affairs instead of working through the existing structure of Catholic and Protestant liaisons to the executive branch.

According to some civil society organizations, primarily Catholic groups exerted too much influence in politics and government, limiting the ability of other groups, including non-Catholic faith groups, to advance their goals or priorities.

During the first half of the year, Congress continued to debate a bill that would reform the nation's penal code. Debate on the bill focused on the prohibition of discrimination in employment, provision of services, and other spheres, and highlighted several social categories for protection against discrimination, including religion. Catholic and Protestant churches largely supported the draft bill, which lapsed in July without passing and was not reintroduced by year's end.

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.

Members of other faiths, including Islam and Judaism, freely expressed their religious beliefs, including at dedicated places of worship. Some non-Catholic religious leaders sought to promote societal change by helping the broader population understand and value religious freedom and the right to freely practice one's religious beliefs. Because of what they referred

to as the entrenched position of Catholicism in the country, representatives of some non-Catholic religious groups said governmental and societal discrimination against non-Catholic groups remained an obstacle.

Religious groups, such as the Interfaith Dialogue Coalition, which is comprises members of all major Protestant church councils, continued to work together and with civil society organizations to assist vulnerable communities, including Haitian migrants, regardless of the religious affiliations of members of those communities. The coalition's assistance addressed food security, humanitarian aid, and access to justice issues. The Catholic Church also provided humanitarian assistance as well as assistance for migrants and others in marginalized communities to navigate administrative processes while also promoting tolerance for religious freedom and diversity.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Chargé and other U.S. embassy representatives engaged government officials, including officials from the Presidential Palace; diplomats, including the Papal Nuncio; and civil society organizations, such as the Interfaith Dialogue Coalition, regarding issues of social inclusion and religious tolerance, including the need for equal treatment of all persons and groups under the law.

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

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