

SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES 2021 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. On August 5, demonstrators, including individuals associated with some religious groups, protested a revision of the country's public health law that mandated COVID-19 vaccination for some categories of workers. The government provided legal exemptions for the vaccination requirement based on religious belief. In December, Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves stated that the government had exempted educators belonging to religious denominations whose doctrines reject vaccination. According to government officials, during the year, the Ministry of Education, National Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information continued to approve exemptions from vaccination requirements for school enrollment, including for COVID-19 vaccinations, a stance that Rastafarians and Thusia Seventh-day Adventists with school-age children supported.

Rastafarians said they were increasingly accepted in society, and overall, the country's citizens were becoming more tolerant of their way of life, including in their use of cannabis. Rastafarians stated, however, they still faced discrimination in both private and public employment and in some private schools.

U.S. embassy officials continued to underscore with government officials the need to respect all religious groups and protect religious freedom as a fundamental right. Embassy officials also met virtually with individuals from the Christian and Muslim communities and nongovernmental organizations to discuss governmental and societal support for religious freedom, including respect for religious minorities. 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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 101,000 (midyear 2021). According to the 2012 government census, 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. Rastafarians account for 1.1 percent of the population. Individuals with no religious affiliation account for 7.5 percent of the population; those listed as “no religion stated” constitute 4.7 percent; and those listed as “other religion” constitute 4.3 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Hindus and Muslims, the former primarily of East Indian origin. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reports it has 765 members (0.7 percent of the population) in the country. 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 freedom of an individual to change his or her religion or belief. In addition, he or she has the freedom to practice his or her religion, either alone or in community with others, and 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 register as nonprofit religious institutions with the Ministry of Education, National Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information to qualify for tax exemptions. Organizations may also register as corporations, requiring an application to the government 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 on religious grounds. Otherwise, by law, vaccinations are required for school enrollment in all schools receiving government funding. The law permits homeschooling.

Possession and use of two ounces or fewer of marijuana is permitted, including for religious sacraments.

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

Government Practices

According to 2020 government data, the most recent available, there were 146 religious groups with approximately 500 registered religious nonprofit organizations representing those denominations. 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 did not register any new religious groups, but it adjusted the registration of three religious groups that had either added branches or adjusted their organizational structures.

In March, the government publicly stated that marijuana use and possession of 56 grams (two ounces) or fewer was now decriminalized. During the year, the Medical Cannabis Authority reported it granted some licenses to “traditional cultivators,” including members of the Rastafarian community.

On August 5, demonstrators, including individuals associated with some religious groups, protested a revision of the country’s public health law that mandated COVID-19 vaccination for some categories of workers. The government provided legal exemptions based on religious belief, however. According to a December news article, Prime Minister Gonsalves said the government exempted some educators belonging to religious denominations whose doctrine opposed vaccination. According to the article, the government granted exemptions to 17 teachers on religious grounds, of 150 who applied. The exemptions included followers of Life by Faith Ministries, Nyabinghi Order (a Rastafarian group), Thusia Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the Assemblies of Yahweh.

According to government officials, during the year, the Ministry of Education, National Reconciliation, Ecclesiastical Affairs, and Information continued to approve exemptions from the requirement of vaccinations for school enrollment, an issue that affected Rastafarians and Thusia Seventh-day Adventists with school-

age children. Government officials also said the ministry applied the constitution's nondiscrimination clauses to include religious observance in schools, including the wearing of dreadlocks by Rastafarians and Thusia Seventh-day Adventists.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Rastafarians again said they were increasingly 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. 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. Rastafarians stated, however, they still faced discrimination in both private and public employment and in some private schools.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to underscore with government officials, including Prime Minister Gonsalves and Health Minister St. Clair Prince, the need to continue respecting all religious groups and protecting religious freedom as a fundamental right.

Embassy officials also discussed governmental and societal support for religious freedom, including respect for religious minorities, in virtual meetings with members of Christian and Muslim communities.

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, underscoring the dangers of religious intolerance and stressing the economic and social benefits of protecting religious freedom, as one post stated, "so we can all live peacefully in this world."