

# **SAINT KITTS AND NEVIS 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion. On February 12, in response to a 2019 High Court ruling that the country's prohibition of the cultivation and possession of cannabis was unconstitutional and an infringement on the freedom of conscience and religion of the Rastafarian community, legislators voted unanimously to approve a package of legislation to establish a Medicinal Cannabis Authority responsible for issuing licenses for use in private residences and in registered places of worship. On March 28, the Governor General declared a state of emergency temporarily suspending all public gatherings under a COVID-19-related curfew and shelter-in-place order. The Prime Minister consulted with the leaders of religious groups prior to the announcement. The Prime Minister encouraged worshippers to participate in virtual services. On August 29, the government lifted the curfew and shelter-in-place orders, and religious places of instruction and worship reopened. The Ministry of Health continued to require the immunization of children before enrolling in school, but it offered waivers for unvaccinated Rastafarian children.

According to media reports, Rastafarians continued to face occasional societal discrimination, particularly in employment. The St. Kitts and Nevis Christian Council, which includes the Anglican, Methodist, Moravian, and Roman Catholic Churches, the Salvation Army, and the Evangelical Association, including the Church of God and Pentecostal Assemblies, continued to promote joint activities, particularly encouraging tolerance in schools.

U.S. embassy officials engaged representatives of the government, including from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Aviation, on issues of religious freedom, including the importance of respect for religious diversity and tolerance. In January, embassy officials met with civil society representatives on religious freedom. The Ambassador visited historic religious sites in St. Kitts and Nevis during the year. Social media posts during the year highlighted religious freedom, including U.S. International religious Freedom Day in January.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 54,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the U.S. government, 74.4 percent of the population is

Protestant, 6.7 percent Catholic, and 1.7 percent Rastafarian. Jehovah's Witnesses are 1.3 percent; others are 7.6 percent, 5.2 percent state no religious affiliation, and 3.2 percent of the population does not specify. According to the 2011 census, 17 percent of the population is Anglican; 16 percent Methodist; 11 percent Pentecostal; 7 percent Church of God; 6 percent Roman Catholic; 5 percent each Baptist, Moravian, Seventh-day Adventist, and Wesleyan Holiness; 4 percent other; and 2 percent each Brethren, evangelical Christian, and Hindu. An additional 1 percent each is Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslim, and Rastafarian; less than 1 percent each is Baha'i, Presbyterian, and Salvation Army. Nine percent state no religious affiliation.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom of individuals to change their religion. It prohibits discrimination based on religious belief.

The Ministry of Nevis Affairs, Labor, Social Security, and Ecclesiastical Affairs is responsible for registering religious groups. Religious groups are not required to register, but doing so provides the government with a database of contacts through which it disseminates information on government policy for religious groups. Registration also allows religious groups to act as charities and import religious items duty-free.

The constitution allows religious groups to establish and maintain schools at the groups' own expense. Public schools offer Christian religious instruction, daily prayers, and religious assemblies; students who do not want to attend are exempt from all religious activities. Public schools require vaccinations for children to attend school.

The law permits the private use of marijuana, including for religious activities. The law does not prohibit the wearing of dreadlocks; however, businesses may restrict the practice if for safety or hygiene reasons. Occupational safety and health laws require all employees, including those with dreadlocks, to cover their hair when using dangerous equipment, handling food, or undertaking health-related activities.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

On February 12, legislators voted unanimously to approve a package of legislation to establish a Medicinal Cannabis Authority, among other cannabis-related reforms, aligning the law with a 2019 High Court ruling that the country's prohibition of the cultivation and possession of cannabis was unconstitutional and an infringement on the freedom of conscience and religion of the Rastafarian community. Under the legislation, the newly created Medicinal Cannabis Authority is responsible for issuing cultivator's licenses exclusively for citizens of the island to grow cannabis for use in private residences and registered places of worship.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on March 28, the Governor General declared a state of emergency temporarily suspending public gatherings under a health-related curfew and shelter-in-place order. The measures included suspending in-person religious services, except for weddings and funerals, which were restricted to no more than 10 members of the immediate family and one officiant. The Prime Minister consulted with the leadership of religious communities prior to the announcement, and the government received the endorsement of two of the main religious bodies in the Federation, the St. Kitts and Nevis Christian Council and the St. Kitts Evangelical Association, which publicly affirmed their support for the government's efforts to prevent the spread of the virus. The Prime Minister encouraged worshippers to participate in virtual services. On August 29, the government lifted the curfew and shelter-in-place orders, and religious places of instruction and worship were allowed to reopen.

The government continued, within limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, its National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP), launched in 2019, for public and private schools. During much of the year, schools were closed due to COVID-19, affecting the operation of the NSCP. The Ministry of Health continued to require immunization of all children before enrolling in school but allowed waivers for unvaccinated Rastafarian children to attend public schools. Some children of the Rastafarian community were homeschooled.

Prison officials allowed Rastafarian prisoners to keep their dreadlocks unless they posed health-related issues or were used to transport contraband. The prison did not provide different diets based on prisoners' religious dietary restrictions.

Rastafarian community representatives continued to say the government maintained an open dialogue with community leaders to discuss improving employment opportunities for Rastafarians.

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

According to media, Rastafarians continued to face occasional societal discrimination, particularly in employment in the private sector. The St. Kitts and Nevis Christian Council, which includes the Anglican, Methodist, Moravian, and Catholic Churches, the Salvation Army, and the Evangelical Association, including the Church of God and Pentecostal Assemblies, continued to promote joint activities that particularly encouraged tolerance for religious diversity in schools.

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

Embassy officials engaged representatives of the government, including from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Aviation, on issues of religious freedom, such as the importance of respect for religious diversity and tolerance. Throughout the year, the embassy maintained social media engagement on religious freedom. The Ambassador's January visit to historic religious sites in St. Kitts and Nevis, including her visit to a Jewish cemetery on Nevis and an interracial church, featured prominently and positively in media, reflecting U.S. commitment to religious freedom and support for the country's religious diversity and tolerance. In January, a series of posts highlighted U.S. National Religious Freedom Day, including the history of religious freedom in the Eastern Caribbean.