

HAITI 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions and faiths. The constitution asserts, “no one may be compelled to belong to a religious organization or to follow a religious teaching contrary to his convictions.” The law establishes the conditions for recognition and practice of religions and faiths. The practitioners of Vodou registered as a religious group, but were not granted civil recognition for marriages and baptisms or the right to issue certain documents. By law, the government provided funds and services to the Catholic Church but not to other religious groups, such as Protestant denominations or the Muslim community. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Denominations (MFA) did not act on a pending request to register the Muslim community or give an explanation to the National Council of Muslims. The council did not renew its request during the year. Many nondenominational Christian and Muslim groups said they operated without registering.

Vodou community leaders stated Vodou practitioners continued to experience some social stigmatization for their beliefs and practices. According to sources, Catholic and Protestant schools, teachers and administrators at times openly rejected and condemned Vodou culture and customs as contrary to the teachings of the Bible. Government officials and dignitaries representing the country’s diverse religious groups paid tribute at the funeral of the Vodou supreme leader, who died in September. Muslim leaders stated they saw a positive trend in societal attitudes towards Islam.

U.S. embassy officials met with the government to advocate fair and equal treatment of all religious groups. They met with the Director General of Religious Denominations (DG) and key religious leaders to reinforce the importance of religious freedom. Embassy representatives also met with faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders to seek their views on religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.1 million (July 2015 estimate). The U.S. government estimates that 55 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 16 percent Protestant, 3 percent other religions, and 1 percent not subscribing to any religion. An estimated 50 percent of the population also

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practices Vodou. According to estimates provided by the DG, leadership of the Protestant Federation of Haiti, and Catholic and Vodou leaders, approximately 50 percent of the population is Protestant (mostly Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopalian/Anglican), 40 percent Catholic, and 10 percent exclusive practitioners of Vodou. Groups present in small numbers include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Rastafarians, Scientologists, and atheists. According to societal leaders, an estimated 60 to 70 percent of the population practices some form of Vodou, often blended with elements of other religions, usually Catholicism. Muslim leaders estimate their community at approximately 8,000 to 10,000. There are fewer than 100 Jews.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions and faiths and establishes laws to regulate the registration and operation of religious groups. The constitution protects against being compelled to belong to a religious group contrary to one's belief. The MFA is responsible for monitoring and administering laws relating to religious groups, while the Bureau of Worship, an office within the ministry, is responsible for registering churches and other religious buildings, clergy, and missionaries of various religious denominations.

An 1860 concordat between the Holy See and the state remains in effect. This agreement gives the Vatican power to approve and select a specific number of bishops in the country with the consent of the government. Under the concordat, the government provides a monthly stipend to Catholic priests. Bishops have official license plates and carry diplomatic passports. Diplomatic passports are issued to some other high-ranking clergy of other faiths.

All religious groups are legally required to register with the MFA. Registration affords religious groups standing in legal disputes, protects their tax-exempt status, and extends civil recognition to documents such as marriage and baptismal certificates. The government does not tax register religious groups and exempts their imports from customs duties. Requirements for registration include information on qualifications of the group's leader, a membership directory, and a list of the group's social projects. Registered religious groups must submit annual updates of membership, projects, and leadership to the MFA.

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Government Practices

Although Vodou was registered in 2003, Vodou priests have still not obtained civil recognition of their marriages. According to the DG, the MFA proposed the president issue an executive order registering Vodou priests to recognize their civil marriages. The president, however, took no action. In the interim, the MFA continued to accept applications requesting such recognition.

The MFA did not act on a pending request for registration of Islam or communicate an explanation for the inaction to the National Council of Muslims. Muslims were still required to obtain civil marriage licenses while Christian pastors were able to conduct government-recognized ceremonies.

The government continued to provide financial support for the maintenance of Catholic churches and to some Catholic schools. Despite ongoing negotiations between the Protestant Federation and the MFA, the Protestant Federation said the system of financial support was still unavailable to other religious groups.

Many nondenominational Christian groups, as well as Muslims, stated they operated freely without formal registration.

Foreign missionaries submitted paperwork to the MFA similar to that required of domestic religious groups to operate privately funded hospitals, clinics, schools, and orphanages.

Government authorities permitted prisoners and detainees to exercise their religious beliefs freely and provided access to Protestant ministers, Catholic priests, and Vodou leaders, when available. Government sources stated their limited institutional capacity restricted their ability to provide the full range of religious services requested by Muslims, particularly in facilities outside of Port-au-Prince. Volunteers provided religious services in some prisons.

Protestant and Catholic clergy continued to report good working relationships with the government. The Catholic Church and Protestant groups operated schools and provided social services the government was unable to provide. Religious leaders reported the government was responsive to their concerns and requests.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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Muslims said the understanding of Islam continued to increase in society, and they experienced less discrimination in everyday life. Muslim women said they experienced less discrimination regarding dress.

According to the DG, attitudes toward Vodou ranged from acceptance as part of the culture to rejection as incompatible with Christianity, as has been the case historically. Vodou community leaders stated Vodou practitioners continued to experience some social stigmatization for their beliefs and practices. Sources stated in Catholic and Protestant schools, teachers and administrators at times openly rejected and condemned Vodou culture and customs as contrary to the teachings of the Bible.

In September, following the death of Max Beauvoir, Vodou's supreme leader or "Ati," state officials and dignitaries representing the country's varied religious groups attended his funeral. President Michel Martelly called Beauvoir's death a "great loss for the country," and posthumously decorated him as a founding member of "Religions for Peace" and the Academy of Haitian Creole.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials to advocate fair and equal treatment of all religious groups. They met with the DG and key religious leaders to reinforce the importance of religious freedom.

Embassy officials met with faith-based NGOs and religious leaders to seek their views on religious freedom. They reached out to the Vodou and Muslim communities for their views on religious freedom, clergy and marriage recognition and registration of religious minority clergy. Embassy representatives also advocated tolerance among all religious groups.