

HAITI 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions. The law establishes the conditions for recognition and practice of religious groups. The government continued to provide the Roman Catholic Church with funds and privileges other religious groups did not receive. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Denominations (MFA) continued to state that it must provide such privileges to the Catholic Church in accordance with an 1860 international convention (concordat) between the government and the Holy See and not due to government preference for the Catholic Church. Although Vodou was a registered religious group, the government again did not grant Vodou clergy legal certification to perform civil marriages or baptisms. The MFA still did not approve long-standing requests from the Muslim community for religious registration. The MFA stated the government did not recognize Islam as an official religion because Islamic practices, such as polygamy, belief in the death penalty, and the practice of adopting Islamic names after conversion were incompatible with the law.

According to media reports, on January 16, police arrested four men suspected of killing well known Catholic priest Joseph Simoly in December 2017. While some individuals alleged Simoly was killed because of his political activism, others said there was no strong evidence that his death was anything but the result of a violent armed robbery. Vodou community leaders said Vodou practitioners continued to experience social stigmatization for their beliefs and practices. According to the leadership of the National Confederation of Haitian Vaudouisants, as in previous years, teachers and administrators in Catholic and Protestant schools at times openly rejected and condemned Vodou culture and customs as contrary to the teachings of the Bible. Muslim leaders said their community, especially Muslim women wearing hijabs, continued to face social stigma and discrimination from the rest of society. Muslims also said they faced discrimination when seeking public- and private-sector employment.

U.S. embassy officials met with the MFA to reinforce the importance of religious freedom, in particular the need for equal protection and equal legal rights for religious minority groups. Embassy representatives also met with faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and Catholic, Protestant, Vodou, and Muslim religious leaders to seek their views on religious freedom and tolerance and to emphasize the importance of respecting religious diversity and the rights of members of minority religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.8 million (July 2018 estimate). The U.S. government estimates 55 percent of the population is Catholic, 29 percent Protestant (15 percent Baptist, 8 percent Pentecostal, 3 percent Adventist, 1.5 percent Methodist, and 0.7 percent other Protestant), 2.1 percent Voodoo (Vodou), 4.6 percent other, and 10 percent none. Groups present in small numbers include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Baha'is, Rastafarians, Scientologists, and atheists. According to societal leaders, an estimated 50 to 80 percent of the population practices some form of Vodou, often blended with elements of other religions, usually Christianity. Muslim leaders estimate their community at 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 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 beliefs. The MFA is responsible for monitoring and administering laws relating to religious groups; within the MFA, the Bureau of Worship is responsible for registering churches and other religious buildings, clergy, and missionaries of various religious denominations. By law, the licensing of pastors, priests, and other religious leaders is a government prerogative. To obtain a license, the prospective religious leader must submit a dossier of 14 documents to the MFA, including a diploma of theology/religious studies, a certificate of good moral conduct, and a recommendation letter signed by a registered religious institution. Once the MFA confirms the applicant's eligibility for a license, the individual must take an oath before an official of the Ministry of Justice.

Although Catholicism has not been the official state religion since the enactment of the 1987 constitution, an 1860 concordat between the Holy See and the state according some preferential treatment to the Catholic Church remains in effect. The concordat gives the Vatican power to approve and select a specific number of bishops in the country with government consent. Under the concordat, the government provides a monthly stipend to Catholic priests. The government does not provide stipends to Episcopalian or other clergy, although both Catholic and

Episcopalian bishops have official license plates and carry diplomatic passports. The government also allows the head of the Protestant Federation to use official license plates and carry a diplomatic passport.

By law, religious institutions must register with the MFA to operate in the country and receive government benefits; however, there is no penalty for operating without registration, and many religious groups continue to do so. Registration affords religious groups standing in legal disputes, provides tax-exempt status, and extends civil recognition to documents such as marriage certificates and baptismal certificates issued by the group. The government recognizes these certificates as legal documents only when prepared by government-licensed clergy. Baptismal certificates are identifying documents with legal authority similar to birth certificates. The government does not tax registered religious groups, and it exempts their imports from customs duties. Requirements for registration include information on the 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 their membership, projects, and leadership to the MFA. Foreign missionaries must submit registration paperwork to operate privately funded clinics, schools, and orphanages. Foreign religious groups do not have special visa requirements.

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

Government Practices

The MFA stated the 2003 government directive establishing Vodou as an official religion gives the right to the Vodou community to issue official documents, but the National Confederation of Haitian Vodou (KNVA) had not taken the necessary administrative steps to begin issuing such documents. The MFA stated it was working with the Vodou community to develop a certification process for *houngans* (male Vodou leaders) and *mambos* (female Vodou leaders) in accordance with the Vodou belief system. Certification permits Vodou leaders to validate marriages, baptisms, and other sacraments performed in accordance with Vodou traditions. As of September there were 9,317 certified pastors, 718 certified priests, but only two certified *houngans/mambos*. The KNVA said the MFA authorized 12 additional Vodou leaders to be officially certified; however, as of December their certification remained pending with the Port au Prince Prosecutor's Office, which was responsible for swearing in the individuals, the final step for official certification.

The MFA again did not act on a request dating from the 1980s to register Muslims as a religious group. The MFA stated the government did not recognize Islam as an official religion because Islamic practices such as polygamy, belief in the death penalty, and the practice of adopting Islamic names after conversion were incompatible with the law. The government issued a specific registration number to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community that did not include the rest of the country's Muslim population; however, it reiterated the registration number was not equivalent to official recognition. Muslims said they continued to obtain civil marriage licenses as their only legal option.

The government continued to provide financial support for the maintenance of Catholic churches and some Catholic schools. The MFA stated it was required to provide such privileges to the Catholic Church in accordance with a concordat signed between the government and the Holy See in 1860 and not due to a government preference for the Catholic Church. The Protestant Federation said that while it was eligible, in accordance with a 2016 agreement, it did not regularly receive government financial support. As of September the Protestant Federation said it had not received any government support. The Protestant Federation said Protestant groups operated approximately 40 percent of the country's universities and 60 percent of its hospitals.

In August the Office of Civilian Protection (OPC), the country's human rights ombudsman, wrote to the Senate and Chamber of Deputies education commissions to express disagreement with the State University of Haiti's practice of holding admissions exams for the 2018-19 academic year on weekends. The OPC stated that several religious leaders said holding exams on Saturdays and Sundays was an infringement on religious liberty. The OPC replied the university was a public institution and should adhere to the Monday-to-Friday schedule that all other public institutions maintained.

Officials within the Department of Corrections stated that limited institutional capacity and budgetary limitations continued to restrict their ability to provide meals in compliance with Islamic dietary restrictions. Prisoners could request to see an imam; however, not all prisons were close enough to an Islamic institution that could provide such services. Volunteers provided religious services in some prisons.

Although by law the government has exclusive authority to license pastors, the Protestant Federation advocated for shared authority to license pastors, stating it would create a more stringent licensing process and reduce the cases of unlicensed

pastors and churches that can spread “dangerous messages” to their congregations. The Protestant Federation cited the case of Makenson Dorillas, who instructed HIV-positive members of his congregation to consume a homemade remedy made from insects as an example of government laxity in licensing churches and pastors. The MFA stated in September that Dorillas was not a licensed pastor.

Protestant and Catholic clergy continued to report largely positive working relationships with the government, citing good access to government officials.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to media reports, on January 16, police arrested four men suspected of killing well known Catholic priest Joseph Simoly in December 2017 in Port-Au-Prince. While some individuals alleged Simoly was killed because of his political activism, others said there was no strong evidence that his death was anything but the result of a violent armed robbery.

Vodou leaders said Vodou practitioners continued to experience social stigmatization for their beliefs and practices. They said members of the public often accused Vodou practitioners of using “occult powers” to commit violent crimes. The KNVA cited as an example the frequent use by sick individuals of a combination of modern and traditional medicine, usually administered by a *houngan* or *mambo*. If the person seeking treatment died, however, prosecutors often accused and arrested *houngans* or *mambos* for causing the death. The KNVA said *houngans* and *mambos* were also subject to violent attacks and sometimes killed by community members who did not practice Vodou due to its associated social stigmas. In December media reported a case in which a young LGBTI Vodou practitioner, Wilbens Maxime, provided treatment to a young woman who sought his assistance after she fell ill. After the woman died, unidentified individuals accused the Vodou practitioner of causing the death with “mystical powers” and killed him.

According to KNVA leadership, as in previous years, teachers and administrators in Catholic and Protestant schools at times openly rejected and condemned Vodou culture and customs as contrary to the teachings of the Bible.

According to some Muslim leaders, members of the Muslim community experienced societal stigmatization and alienation, especially Muslim women wearing hijabs. For example, Muslim women wearing the hijab had difficulty obtaining identification documents such as passports and identity cards because

local authorities applied strict standards for face visibility in official documents. Muslims also reportedly faced discrimination when seeking public and private sector employment.

The local chapter of Religions for Peace, an international interfaith organization whose members include representatives from the Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant Churches as well as the Vodou community, continued to meet, focusing on promoting human rights, including religious freedom. In October the chapter organized a roundtable to discuss religion and women's rights in the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials met with government officials, including officials from the MFA, to emphasize the importance of fair and equal treatment for all religious groups, including religious minorities, and equal treatment in the government's required registration process.

Embassy officials also met with faith-based NGOs and religious leaders in the Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, and Vodou communities to discuss religious freedom, societal stigmatization of some religious minorities, the importance of religious tolerance, and challenges some groups faced in obtaining registration of their group and clergy.