

# HAITI 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions. The law establishes the conditions for official recognition of religious groups. By law, any religious group wanting official recognition must receive government approval, a multiple-step process requiring documentary support. Due to budgetary constraints, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Denominations (MFA) did not have discretionary funding available to support religious activities during the year, such as youth conferences. The MFA continued to accord preferential treatment to the Catholic Church under terms of a concordat with the Holy See, including tax exemptions and diplomatic privileges. During the year, the National Council for Haitian Muslims, composed of Sunni and Shia groups, continued to seek official government recognition. Although the government granted the Ahmadiyya Muslims a registration number in 2018, it did not grant the group full recognition. No Muslim group achieved full recognition by the government as an established religion by year's end. The Ministry of Education (MOE) allocated funding only for Catholic, Protestant, and Anglican registered schools. According to the National Council for Haitian Muslims, the four registered Muslim primary schools did not receive any funding. Vodou is a registered religion; however, representatives from the Haitian Vodou Federation (KNVA in Haitian Creole) said the Ministry of Justice recognized only two of 20 Vodou priests who had been approved by the MFA.

Vodou religious leaders said some practitioners continued to experience social stigmatization for their beliefs and practices. For example, according to KNVA representatives, an unknown number of individuals in the town of Mackandal attacked with machetes and killed a *hougan*, a Vodou priest, accusing him of the sudden and unexplained death of a neighbor. In another incident, neighbors set fire to the house of a *mambo*, a Vodou priestess, whom a Protestant pastor accused of causing the illness and subsequent death of an infant. As in previous years, Vodou leaders said there were general societal suspicions of their religion as a sinister force. They said Christian leaders promoted violence against Vodou followers and condemned Vodou practices. In October Landy Mathurin, the president of the National Council for Haitian Muslims, said the population generally respected Muslims, including the right of Muslim women to wear the hijab.

U.S. embassy officials met with the MFA to reinforce the importance of religious freedom and the need for equal protection and legal rights for minority religious groups. Embassy representatives met with Catholic, Protestant, Vodou, and Muslim religious leaders and Religions for Peace (RFP), a faith-based organization that promoted religious tolerance and community cooperation, to seek their views on religious freedom and tolerance and to emphasize the importance of respecting religious diversity and minority religious groups. In August an embassy representative attended the swearing-in ceremony of the new national chief Vodou priest to demonstrate support for the community. In addition, a senior embassy official attended the opening ceremony of the country's first Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) temple in September.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U. S. government estimates the total population at 10.9 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the government's 2017 Survey on Mortality, Morbidity, and Use of Services, the most recent study available, Protestants and Seventh-day Adventists represent approximately 50 percent of the population, while Catholics constitute 35 percent. The same study found 12.5 percent of the population claims no religion. Other faiths, including Judaism, Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Rastafarians, Scientologists, and Baha'is, have small numbers of adherents. According to the same report, the Vodou faith represents approximately 3 percent of the population; however, most observers state that figure is underestimated because many individuals practice Vodou secretly, in addition to another faith.

## **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 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 religious organizations, clergy, and missionaries of various religious denominations.

By law, religious institutions must register with the MFA to 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 and provides tax-exempt status. The Ministry of Justice allows registered religious groups to issue civil documents, such as marriage and baptismal certificates. The government recognizes these certificates as legal documents only when prepared by government-licensed clergy. Baptismal certificates are identifying documents with the same legal authority as birth certificates. To obtain official government recognition, a religious group must provide information on the qualifications of its leaders, 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.

A 2003 government directive established Vodou as an official religion and accords the right to the Vodou community to issue official documents.

By law, the licensing of members of clergy 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 or religious studies, a certificate of moral conduct, and a recommendation letter signed by a registered religious institution. Once the MFA confirms the applicant's eligibility for a license, a Ministry of Justice official administers an oath, which qualifies the applicant to perform civil ceremonies, such as marriages and baptisms.

A concordat between the Holy See and the government provides the Vatican authority 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 other religious leaders. Catholic and Episcopalian bishops and the head of the Protestant Federation have official license plates and carry diplomatic passports.

Foreign missionaries operating in the country are subject to the same legal and administrative requirements as their domestic counterparts.

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

## **Government Practices**

The MFA and law enforcement authorities at times intervened in cases of violence against Vodou practitioners. According to the MFA's director general of

the Bureau of Worship, in September the MFA facilitated the arrest of a Christian pastor who burned down the house of a Vodou practitioner in Aquin, South Department who had refused to convert to Christianity. MFA officials helped the victim file a criminal complaint and relocate to a different neighborhood.

According to the MFA, as of the end of the year, there were 9,195 certified Protestant pastors, 704 certified Catholic priests, and two certified Vodou clergy. Certification allowed clergy to conduct official marriages, baptisms, and other sacraments. In 2018 the MFA approved the applications of 20 Vodou clergy and submitted their files to the Justice Ministry for final oath-taking, as legally required. The Ministry of Justice granted only two Vodou clergy final authorization that year. During 2019, however, no additional Vodou clergy achieved full official status. According to KNVA representatives, authorities did not approve the other 18 candidates because they were perceived as not supporting the administration of President Jovenel Moïse.

The three Muslim communities residing in the country – Sunni, Shia, and Ahmadiyya – individually sought official recognition. According to the president of the National Council for Haitian Muslims, Landy Mathurin, the MFA did not act upon their requests during the year. MFA officials indicated they were continuing to review the Ahmadiyya application, after granting the community a registration number in 2018. All Muslims, regardless of group affiliation, were required to go through a civil ceremony for events such as marriages.

The MFA continued to honor its obligations, such as tax exemptions and diplomatic privileges, to the Catholic Church under the terms of the concordat.

While the government did not tax registered religious groups and traditionally exempted their imports from customs duties, on October 23, the government announced it would end all customs exemptions, including for clergy. The legality and scope of the government's decision remained unclear through the end of year.

In August the government, through the MOE, granted 50 million gourdes (\$570,000) to Catholics; 40 million gourdes (\$456,000) to Protestants; and 20 million gourdes (\$228,000) to Anglicans to support their respective schools. The allocations reflected the concordat between the government and the Catholic Church, and the large number of Protestant and Anglican schools in the country. The government did not allocate funds to other religious groups. According to the National Council for Haitian Muslims, the four registered Muslim primary

schools, all registered in 2010, did not receive any funding. The Bureau of Worship had no discretionary funds during the year to support social programming by religious groups, such as youth conferences, as it had in previous years.

During the year, the MOE accommodated some students' religious practices by scheduling certain exams on weekdays. The decision was made in response to an August 2018 letter from the Office of Citizen Protection (OPC), which serves as the country's human rights ombudsman, to the Senate and Chamber of Deputies education commissions. The OPC stated it objected to the practice of holding public university admissions exams on weekends, after it received a complaint from the Seventh-day Adventist Church that requiring exams on Saturdays violated the religious freedom of its adherents.

The Protestant Federation advocated for more authority over the process that determines which individuals the government certifies as Protestant clergy. The organization stated that with more authority, it could stop unlicensed pastors and churches from acting as agents of Protestants churches and spreading "dangerous messages." The federation cited the example of a self-proclaimed Protestant prophet, Makenson Dorillas, who made headlines in October when he led an antigovernment protest calling for President Moise's resignation, although Dorillas had no legal status as a clergyman. Following the protest, the Office of Worship began consulting with Protestant groups to address self-appointed religious leaders who lack official recognition.

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

Vodou clergy said some practitioners continued to experience violence and social stigmatization for their beliefs and practices, stating that members of the public often accused Vodou practitioners of using "occult powers" to harm and sometimes kill neighbors. According to KNVA representatives, an unknown number of individuals from the town of Mackandal in the Grand'Anse Department attacked with machetes and killed a Vodou priest in September after blaming him for the sudden, unexplained death of a neighbor. The assailants set fire to the priest's home; reportedly some individuals may have been detained and subsequently released. In October KNVA representatives also reported neighbors accused and attacked a *mambo* in Port au Prince, who was suspected of using her powers to cause the death of an infant. According to KNVA representatives, at the end of the year, the priestess remained in hiding.

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 said Simoly was killed because of his political activism, others said there was no evidence to support that theory.

KNVA representatives reported that, as in previous years, Catholic and Protestant leaders frequently rejected and condemned Vodou practices as contrary to the teachings of the Bible.

According to the president of the National Council for Haitian Muslims, Landy Mathurin, Muslims were generally well respected. He said the population had a positive perception of Islam, including of Muslim women choosing to wear hijabs.

The local RFP chapter, whose members include representatives from the Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant churches as well as the Vodou community, continued to meet, focusing on religious tolerance. During the year, RFP launched a “positive peace initiative” designed to advance development through an absence of conflict, which they stated was an important value for the organization. RFP members also said they attended each other’s religious ceremonies to demonstrate mutual respect.

During his swearing-in ceremony in August, the national chief Vodou priest or *ati*, Carl-Henry Desmornes, promised to promote environmental protection and the Vodou community’s outreach efforts. Director of the Bureau of Worship Evans Souffrant, Mayor of Tabarre Nice Simon, and Chamber of Deputies Deputy Caleb Desrameaux delivered remarks emphasizing Vodou’s important role in the country.

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

Embassy representatives met with government officials, including from the MFA, to emphasize the importance of fair and equal treatment for all religious groups, including religious minorities.

Embassy officials also met with religious leaders from Protestant, Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, Muslim, and Vodou communities, as well as RFP, to discuss religious freedom and tolerance, and challenges some groups faced in obtaining official certification. In August an embassy representative attended the traditional Vodou swearing-in ceremony of the national chief Vodou priest to

demonstrate support for the community. In September a senior embassy official attended the opening dedication ceremony of the Port-au-Prince Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ.