

HAITI 2016 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. Vodou has been a registered religious group since 2003 but has not been able to perform civilly recognized marriages or baptisms. By law, the government provided funds and services to the Catholic Church but not to other religious groups. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Denominations (MFA) did not act on a pending request to register the Muslim community. Many nondenominational Christian and Muslim groups said they operated without registering with the MFA.

A mob decapitated a Vodou priest following reports the priest had used his spiritual powers to kill a local woman and a church director. Vodou community leaders stated Vodou practitioners continued to experience some social stigmatization for their beliefs and practices. According to the leadership of the National Confederation of Haitian Vaudouisants (KNVA), 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.

U.S. embassy officials met with the MFA to reinforce the importance of religious freedom, as well as equal protections and equal legal rights for minority religious groups. 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 10.5 million (July 2016 estimate). The U.S. government estimates that 55 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 29 percent Protestant, 7 percent adhere to other religions, and 5 percent do not subscribe to any religion. 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 50 to 80 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 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 and 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. Catholic and Episcopalian bishops have official license plates and carry diplomatic passports.

All religious groups are legally required to register with the MFA. Registration affords religious groups standing in legal disputes, provides tax-exempt status, and extends civil recognition to documents such as marriage and baptismal certificates, which are issued in a similar way to birth certificates. The government does not tax registered 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 their membership, projects, and leadership to the MFA. Foreign missionaries are required to submit registration paperwork to operate privately funded clinics, schools, and orphanages.

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

Government Practices

Although Vodou was registered in 2003, the government continued not to recognize Vodou marriage and baptism ceremonies. The MFA continued to accept applications requesting such recognition.

The MFA did not act on a pending request for registration of Islam as a religious group or communicate an explanation for the inaction to the National Council of

Muslims. Muslims were required to obtain civil marriage licenses while Christian clergy were able to conduct government-recognized ceremonies.

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

Muslims and many nondenominational Christian groups stated they operated freely without formal registration.

Government sources stated their continued limited institutional capacity restricted their ability to provide the full range of religious services for prisoners requested by Muslims, particularly in facilities outside of Port-au-Prince. Volunteers provided religious services in some prisons, and prisoners were unhindered from exercising their religious beliefs.

Protestant and Catholic clergy continued to report good working relationships with the government. The Catholic Church and Protestant groups operated schools and provided numerous social services.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to media reports, a mob decapitated a Vodou houngan – a male Vodou priest – in the town of Toman in May. Members of the community reportedly believed the houngan had used his spiritual powers to cause the death of a local woman and a former director of a local church. No one was charged in the case.

According to the MFA, while many Christians were tolerant of Vodouism, others rejected it as incompatible with their beliefs. Vodou community leaders stated Vodou practitioners continued to experience some social stigmatization for their beliefs and practices. The KNVA leadership stated that 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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives met regularly with government officials, including the minister of foreign affairs and religious denominations, to advocate for fair and

equal treatment for all religious groups as well as to advocate for registration of religious groups that have completed the requisite registration procedures.

Embassy officials met with faith-based NGOs and religious leaders in the Protestant, Catholic, and Vodou communities to discuss their views on religious freedom, clergy, and marriage recognition, as well as on the registration of religious minority clergy. In meetings with religious leaders, embassy officials stressed the importance of religious freedom and tolerance and discussed the influential role of religion in society.