

HAITI 2017 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 Catholic Church with funds and privileges other religious groups did not receive. Despite Vodou's registration as a religious group since 2003, the government still did not grant Vodou clergy legal certification to perform civilly recognized marriages or baptisms. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Denominations (MFA) continued not to approve long-standing requests from the Muslim community for religious registration. The MFA discussed the issue with the Muslim community during the year and requested registration paperwork and information about the community's financing, in line with the government's standard registration requirements.

Vodou community leaders stated 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 continued to face social stigma and discrimination from the rest of society, especially Muslim women wearing hijabs. Muslims also reportedly 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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.6 million (July 2017 estimate). The U.S. government estimates that 55 percent of the population is Roman 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

(Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Bahais, 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 approximately 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; within the MFA, the Bureau of Worship is responsible for registering churches and other religious buildings, clergy, and missionaries of various religious denominations.

Although Roman Catholicism has not been the official state religion since 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 clergy, although both Catholic and Episcopalian bishops have official license plates and carry diplomatic passports. No other religious groups receive stipends for their clergy.

By law, religious institutions must register with the MFA in order 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. The government recognizes these certificates as legal documents only when prepared by government-certified clergy. Baptismal certificates are identifying documents with similar legal authority as 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 are required to 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

Houngans (male) and mambos (female) priests said the government continued its practice of not issuing them government-recognized documents for marriage and baptismal ceremonies, even though Vodou is a registered religion. The MFA said it was working with the Vodou community to develop a certification process in accordance with the Vodou belief system.

The MFA still did not act on a request dating from the 1980s to register Muslims as a religious group. The government continued to request financial documentation as a prerequisite to complete registration. 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. Negotiations between the Protestant Federation and the MFA continued regarding Protestant access to government funding; however, the Protestant Federation said in November that government financial support was still unavailable to Protestants. The government said it had no plans to extend public funding to any non-Catholic religious groups.

Government sources stated that limited institutional capacity continued to restrict their ability to provide for the religious needs of Muslim prisoners throughout the country, namely offering meals in compliance with Islamic dietary restrictions and arranging access to Muslim clerics. Prisoners could request to see a Muslim cleric; however, not all prisons were close enough to a Muslim institution that could provide such services. Volunteers provided religious services in some prisons. Muslim prisoners could pray freely.

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

Vodou community leaders said Vodou practitioners continued to experience some 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. For example, a man from the southwestern department of Grand-Anse was arrested in November for using “magic” to poison another man to use his corpse in a Vodou ceremony. At year’s end, the accused was in prison awaiting trial.

According to some Muslim leaders, members of the Muslim community experienced societal stigmatization and alienation, especially Muslim women wearing hijabs. Muslims also reportedly faced discrimination when seeking public and private sector employment.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials met 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, 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 the registration of their group and clergy.