

HAITI 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

Haiti's 1987 constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions. Any religious group seeking official recognition must obtain it through a multistep registration process with the Bureau of Worship (BOW), a unit within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The government has a special relationship with the Roman Catholic Church originating from an 1860 concordat between the government and the Holy See that affords the Catholic Church certain privileges. The concordat also accords the government the right of consent over the appointment of Catholic archbishops and bishops.

According to the National Council of Haitian Muslims and the BOW, Sunni and Shia Muslim groups had not completed the procedures for registration and remained unregistered at year's end. While religious leaders representing the Catholic, Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Muslim, Vodou, and Jewish communities said the government did not restrict their religious freedom during the year, many religious leaders said the government's failure to maintain security and order hampered their communities' abilities to practice their religions freely. BOW Director General Evans Souffrant said promoting interreligious discussion and respect for religious freedom was his highest priority.

Media outlets reported armed gangs, kidnapping for ransom, and general insecurity impacted religious leaders and communities. During the year, gang members killed and kidnapped both clergy and lay persons. Examples included the killing by armed groups of an Italian nun on June 25 and of a police inspector while he attended church on July 24. On June 29, gang members reportedly killed six persons, including a Vodou priest, in Pétionville, while clashes between the 400 Mawozo and Kraze Baryé gangs on October 10-16 in Croix-des-Bouquets resulted in the death of 10 persons, including artisans from Noailles, a village, known for its connections to Vodou. On May 2, in one of the many kidnappings reported during the year, gang members kidnapped Pastor Alcero Marc Arthur in Pétionville and released him on May 4 after the gang received ransom payments.

Leaders from all major religious communities said the killings and kidnappings were part of a wider trend of rising gang violence. According to religious leaders, gangs were motivated by financial gain rather than religious discrimination. They said religious leaders holding a prominent position in society were likely to have access to personal funds and wealthy foreign donors.

Vodou leaders reported Vodouists continued to face stigma from other religious groups, who they said described Vodou as contrary to Christianity. Some Vodou leaders also expressed optimism about increased societal tolerance and acceptance of Vodou, which is a government-recognized religion.

U.S. embassy officials engaged Souffrant on issues of religious freedom, including the importance of respecting religious diversity. Embassy officials held regular conversations with government officials and Catholic, Muslim, Protestant, evangelical Christian, and Vodou religious leaders to discuss the state of religious freedom and challenges religious groups faced. Religious leaders were also a key component of embassy engagement with civil society organizations. In March, the Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations engaged religious leaders as part of her civil society consultations. Religious leaders were an integral part of the development of the *U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability* throughout the year, in part because gangs often targeted members of religious groups. During the holiday season in December, the embassy used social media to share statements supporting religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.3 million (midyear 2022). According to the government's *2017 Survey on Mortality, Morbidity, and Use of Services*, the most recent study available, Christians who self-identified as either Protestant, Episcopalian, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, or Jehovah's Witness together comprise 52 percent of the population, Catholics 35 percent, and Vodouists 2 percent. In the survey, 11 percent of the population did not state a religious preference. An estimated 60 percent of Protestants and evangelical Protestants in the country belong to the Protestant Federation.

These include Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, the Salvation Army, Seventh-day Adventists, and some Baptists. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints states it has 24,000 adherents, mostly in Port-au-Prince. According to the president of the National Council for Haitian Muslims, there are approximately 10,000 adherents across three branches of Islam – Sunni, Shia, and Ahmadiyya –in the country. Only members of the Sunni and Shia communities, however, belong to the council. The Jewish community numbers approximately 20 individuals. According to government officials and religious leaders, ongoing insecurity in the country makes it difficult to confirm precise population figures for any religion. According to some Vodou practitioners, not all Vodouists describe Vodou as a religion. Many consider it instead a form of spirituality they practice alongside other faith traditions, such as Catholicism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions. Under the constitution, the BOW's primary responsibilities are to register religious and missionary organizations, certify the credentials of clergy of all denominations, and authorize their operations in the country. The law also stipulates that the BOW encourage tolerance and arbitrate conflicts within and between religious groups.

Registering religious organizations and clergy offers certain benefits, but there are no penalties for noncompliance. Benefits for registered religious organizations may include tax-exempt status, exemption from import duties on church-related items, standing in legal disputes, and eligibility to receive public land to build schools. To obtain this status, a religious group must submit information on its leaders' qualifications, a membership directory, a list of the group's social projects, and annual activity reports to the BOW. Completion of the separate clergy registration process also confers certain benefits, namely legal authority to conduct civil ceremonies, such as marriages and baptisms, following an oath-taking ceremony organized by the Ministry of Justice. To obtain registered clergy status, the individual sponsored by a registered religious

entity must submit approximately 10 documents. The required documentation package includes proof of completion for both secondary school and university or seminary-level religious studies, as well as a police certificate confirming no criminal record and no outstanding warrants.

A concordat between the government and the Holy See signed in 1860 formalizes the relationship between the state and the Catholic Church and regulates the Catholic Church's structure within the state. The concordat accords the government some say in Catholic Church leadership, including providing the government the right of consent over the appointment of archbishops and bishops. The government has not exercised this right in recent years. The concordat also affords privileges to the Catholic Church, including state protection and financial support such as monthly stipends for some priests.

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

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

Government Practices

While religious leaders representing the Catholic, Protestant, evangelical Christian, Muslim, Vodou, and Jewish communities said the government did not restrict their religious freedom during the year, many religious leaders said the government's failure to maintain security and order hampered their communities' abilities to practice their religions freely. On September 17, the Catholic Haitian Conference of Religious released a statement calling on the country's leaders to find a peaceful resolution to the current crisis. According to evangelical Pastor Clement Joseph, former secretary general of the interreligious organization Religions for Peace (RFP) Haiti, the government did not directly infringe on a person's religious liberties, "but by failing to protect all citizens' rights, Haitians were unable to freely practice their religions." Joseph stated that Imam Landy Mathurin, the president of the National Council of Haitian Muslims, said three mosques around Port-au-Prince were forced to close because of security concerns. "The right to religious freedom is not a gift," said

Monseigneur Pierre André Dumas of the Catholic Church, echoing others' concerns regarding insecurity's impact on religious worship. "It is a fundamental right we must continue to fight for. We must organize ourselves in order to reclaim this right," he said.

General insecurity in the metropolitan Port-au-Prince area also worsened existing stigma against the Vodou community, according to Wilfrid Sainte-Juste, a Vodou *oungan*, or male priest. Speculation that Vodou leaders encouraged gang violence, including by giving gang members "magic," which defended them from bullets, became a popular explanation for the worsening situation, Sainte-Juste said. As a result, many Vodouists suffered violence and threats of violence during the year, both from gangs and non-gang members who thought Vodouists supported gangs, affecting all citizens regardless of religious affiliation. BOW Director General Souffrant condemned the violence and discrimination against Vodouists. Dumas said he believed a resurgence of cholera also led to increased violence against the Vodou community, in keeping with a historical pattern of increased discrimination against Vodouists in times of crisis.

On October 19, Souffrant stated that promoting interreligious discussion and respect for religious freedom was his highest priority. "We are working so that religion will no longer be a cause of conflict in Haiti," he said. He also affirmed the government did not impose restrictions on any religions, stating that the ministry's registration process was designed to ensure religious leaders had adequate training and not to restrict any religious practices or expression.

Allegations that the Episcopal Church of Haiti's importation license was used to illegally import weapons through the port of Port-au-Prince were widely discussed in media outlets and by political and human rights organizations throughout the year. On August 16, Episcopal Church of Haiti leadership removed Father Frantz Cole, who was believed to be involved with the illegal importation of a container of weapons that authorities seized in July, from his role as executive secretary. In an August 19 message, church leadership stated it would cooperate with authorities; neither the church nor its lawyer "would provide a defense for any person, no matter who they were, prosecuted rightly or wrongly, in the context of this case."

The 1860 concordat remained a major subject of debate among religious leaders during the year. A Catholic leader said the Catholic Church continued to adhere to the concordat because it was legally bound to do so under the country's legal system. One Protestant leader said that, rather than being proof of the government's preferential treatment of the Catholic Church over other religious denominations, the state's cooperation with the Catholic Church was a product of the church's more hierarchical structure. The clearly defined leadership structure of the Catholic Church, he said, made it easier for government leadership to identify points of contact and collaborators. Several other non-Catholic religious leaders raised concerns regarding the concordat. One Protestant leader said the concordat afforded the Catholic Church powerful influence over the government. Vodou leaders cited it as an example of "a historical institutionalized predisposition" against them. The president of the National Council for Haitian Muslims said he believed the concordat provided the Catholic community an unfair advantage over other religious groups, although he did not consider this to be a form of intentional discrimination on the part of the government.

Vodou leaders continued to say that while the state of religious freedom made them optimistic for the future, prejudice against them still lingered and often made Vodouists fearful to practice openly. They did not, however, accuse the government of directly discriminating against them. Vodou leaders said the government could do more to combat ongoing societal discrimination by encouraging acceptance of and education about Vodou and Vodouists.

Some Protestant religious leaders continued to advocate increased government regulation of religious groups. One leader raised concerns that not enough education was required for pastors to register with the BOW, which from his perspective granted the authority of pastorship to those who did not have adequate training as religious leaders or who were generally uneducated. Others also echoed the perception that "poorly trained" pastors spread dangerous misinformation, especially in rural areas, relating to health concerns such as the resurgence of cholera and COVID-19.

The BOW said it continued to work with less established religious groups to facilitate their registrations, while defending its rigorous registration process. BOW Director General Souffrant emphasized oversight was required for religious groups to preserve religious liberty for all. He echoed concerns raised by Catholic and Protestant leadership regarding the spread of misinformation by religious leaders, which, he said, was a threat to security and health. According to the BOW, nationwide insecurity remained a significant challenge to its efforts to register religious leaders during the year (e.g., Sunni and Shia Muslim groups had not completed the procedures for registration and remained unregistered at year's end).

Despite the benefits of registering, many religious groups and leaders continued to choose to remain unregistered, according to the BOW, in order to avoid government oversight. Religious minorities said they generally disagreed with this assessment or suggested it was an oversimplification. According to a Vodou leader, in contrast to its Catholic and Protestant counterparts, the decentralized Vodou community did not easily fit into the government's criteria for institutional registration, which emphasizes a hierarchical leadership structure. The death of Euvonie Georges Auguste, a *mambo* (female Vodou priest) who had led the National Confederation of Haitian Vodou for many years, also raised organizational difficulties for the Vodou community as its leaders tried to reach consensus on her replacement.

According to 2021 BOW statistics, the most recent available, there were 9,195 certified Protestant pastors, 704 certified Catholic priests, and two certified Vodou clergy at the end of 2021, representing no change from 2020. By the end of 2022, the government had not certified any Muslim clergy, including from the newly registered Ahmadiyya community. On October 19, BOW Director General Souffrant said he estimated there were more Catholic and Protestant religious leaders than in 2020, but the ongoing security situation made maintaining registrations of religious leaders difficult.

According to the World Bank, approximately 75 percent of total primary school enrollment and 82 percent of total secondary school enrollment in the country was in private, usually religious, schools. The Ministry of Education (MOE) stated

that Catholic schools accounted for 15 percent of all schools in the education system (16 percent of total enrollment) and public schools accounted for 12 percent. The remaining 73 percent of schools were private institutions either run by Protestant churches (of a wide variety of denominations), secular for-profit, or secular nonprofit organizations. Although there were no available official statistics, the majority of these were private Protestant institutions, according to the BOW. The significant expansion of private Protestant institutions was initiated and facilitated in large part by the Jean-Claude Duvalier administration's national education campaign during the 1970s and 1980s, which required missionaries to build an affiliated school with the construction of any church. Pastor Jean Kisomairé Duré, the vice president of the Protestant Federation, said 34 percent of students attended Protestant schools during the year. According to Imam Mathurian, the Muslim community had three schools located in the metropolitan Port-au-Prince area, none of which received MOE funding.

During the 2021-22 school year, the MOE did not disburse funding to any religious schools, according to Catholic and Protestant leaders. "To my knowledge, over the course of 2022, the Haitian government did not honor its dues or promises to the Catholic Church for presbyteral schools or other programs," Father Jean Rodney Brévil, permanent vice secretary of the Haitian Council of Catholic Bishops, stated on October 24. Duré also said none of their schools received MOE assistance during the year, but Catholic Churches still received some government financing through the framework established in the 1860 concordat. In 2020, the government signed a three-year agreement with the Catholic Church calling for annual public financial support for Catholic schools, especially those in vulnerable areas, as identified jointly by political and civil society leaders. As of year's end, there was no announcement regarding funding under this agreement.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders emphasized rising general insecurity was the issue with the most impact on religious freedom. Armed criminal gangs kidnapped religious leaders and congregants during the year for ransom or extortion. Protestant

leaders said that churches' access to financial resources led gangs to demand higher "protection" payments from their leadership. Pastor Jean Bilda Robert, the president of the Council of Evangelical Churches of Haiti, said "a persistent mentality" among gang members that religious groups and leaders had "money to spare" led gangs to target them for kidnapping.

Media outlets reported gangs kidnapped or killed several religious leaders during the year. According to press reports, on January 1, gang members killed one person and injured several others during a traditional Independence Day Mass at the Cathedral of Gonaïves. The attack was reportedly part of an apparent assassination attempt against Prime Minister Ariel Henry.

Sister Luiza Dell'Orto, an Italian nun, died on June 25 after gang members shot her in the Port-au-Prince neighborhood of Delmas 19. Sister Dell'Orto had worked with street children and as a professor of philosophy at a seminary for approximately 20 years. On June 26, Pope Francis praised her "dedication, above all, to the service of street children."

Radio Caraïbes FM reported that, on June 29, gang members killed six persons, including a Vodou priest, in Pétionville. The assailants attempted to burn the victims' bodies and took each victim's left shoe, the latter act reportedly the gang's "signature" for intimidating victims.

Media outlets reported that, on July 24, members of the 400 Mawozo gang, including gang leader "Lanmò San Jou" (Death any Day), entered the premises of the Assembly of God Church in Croix-des-Bouquets during a service. They targeted, shot, and killed police inspector Reginald Laleau while he was attending the service. On August 19, the Haitian National Police announced it had arrested six gang members connected to the shooting.

According to media reports, on October 10-16, during clashes between the 400 Mawozo and Kraze Baryé gangs in Croix-des-Bouquets, 10 persons were killed, including artisans from Noailles, a village known for its artisans and connections to Vodou. This attack was especially impactful for Noailles residents because

almost exactly one year prior, on October 12, 2021, 400 Mawozo gang members killed prominent sculptor and *Oungan* Anderson Belony.

Media reported the Haitian National Police prevented a kidnapping attempt outside the Sacred Heart Church in Turgeau on February 21, when members of the Village de Dieu gang attempted to kidnap schoolchildren. On April 28, gang members kidnapped Catholic Priest Whatner Aupont in Croix-des-Bouquets and released him later that evening. On May 2, gang members kidnapped Pastor Alcero Marc Arthur in Pétionville and released him on May 4 after his church paid ransom. On June 4, Father Claircius Dorvilus, head of the Catholic Church of Laplate Nieraque in the Northwest Department, was kidnapped, along with three other persons, when an armed group broke into his church. On July 8, Dr. Gretta Lataillade Roy was kidnapped at the entrance of the Catholic Church of Christ the King, where she was going to attend mass. Local media outlets reported the gang released Roy on July 22 after the gang received ransom. On July 23, armed gangs kidnapped Pastor Elysée Dagobert of the Apostolic Faith Church of Turgeau, an evangelical Christian church, in Pernier. He was released without ransom on July 26.

Media outlets reported that, on July 28, gang members set fire to a provisional building functioning as the Catholic Cathedral of Port-au-Prince since the 2010 earthquake. Father Marc Henri Siméon, communications officer for the Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince, told local media firefighters intervened and only 20 percent of the building was affected by the fire. No injuries were reported.

During the year, many religious leaders called for peace or organized protests against insecurity. On May 13, the Catholic Parish of Our Lady of Fatima organized a march to pray for peace in central Port-au-Prince, including the gang-controlled areas of Martissant, Cité Soleil, and Croix-des-Bouquets. On July 12, the Catholic Archbishop for Port-au-Prince Max Leroy Mésidor denounced widespread violence.

Vodou leaders cited historical injustices and stated there was still stigmatization against their religion. They said some individuals in the Protestant community were particularly concerning to them and possibly a threat to their religious

freedom. One leader said prejudice against Vodouists was the product of lack of societal awareness, and greater education on Vodou, especially in rural areas, would reduce stigma. “The idea persists that Vodou is something of the devil, something incompatible with Christianity, but Vodou has been in Haiti from the very beginning,” Oungan Sainte-Juste said. “At its core, Vodou is a celebration of love and life.”

Vodou leaders also spoke about the importance of interfaith dialogue for eliminating stigma between groups and promoting religious freedom. Conversely, one Protestant leader said his community often felt uncomfortable with Vodou rhetoric describing Christianity as a religion “imported by slavery” and not authentic to Haitian culture. He also called for greater interfaith dialogue to resolve both sides’ preconceived notions of the other. Catholic leadership also highlighted longstanding tensions between Catholics and Vodouists. They regretted that some Vodou leaders used “incendiary, ruthless, and hostile” language to highlight the Catholic Church’s past mistakes in the country.

According to Father Brévil, the Catholic Church’s position in society often appeared to be uncertain. He said that while many non-Catholics believed the Catholic Church should only occupy itself with religious affairs, the church had always led social and political efforts, including providing education and health care, and advocating social justice. Brévil said he regretted that “Haiti’s misfortunes are attributed to the Catholic Church,” despite the decades of hard work by Catholic clergy and religious to contribute to society. “The Catholic Church is present in all the cities and outskirts of the country; it evangelizes, educates, cares for the sick, defends the most vulnerable, contributes to professional training of youth, and supports and encourages social and economic activities for the working classes.”

Protestant leaders described the significant challenges the security situation posed for maintaining their social programs. Pastor Duré said more than 800 students in Protestant schools were unable to attend classes due to security-related school closures, and barricades erected by protesters beginning in August blocked patients from accessing Protestant-funded hospitals. Both Duré

and Pastor Clement Joseph expressed regret at the closure of a major Protestant church, La Foi Apostolique, in central Port-au-Prince due to security concerns. Joseph noted the church's construction was made possible by widespread fundraising after the earthquake and its closure was a huge loss for the Protestant community.

In October, National Council for Haitian Muslims President Mathurin said, "All Haitians are at risk of violence, not Muslims in particular." He added that Muslims did not face any stigmatization and were generally well respected and that many Muslim women felt comfortable wearing the hijab in public. He said many youths tolerated and respected Islam because several high-profile citizens, including singers and athletes, had converted to Islam. He also expressed sadness at the constraints the security situation placed on Muslims' abilities to travel safely to mosques or gather as a community.

RFP, an interfaith organization with leaders from the Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Episcopalian, and Vodouist communities on its coordinating committee, continued to pursue collaborative religious advocacy. Throughout the year, RFP issued several open letters calling for peace, solidarity, and respect for human dignity; notably in response to rising violence and kidnappings. RFP also issued a letter in favor of Prime Minister Henry's October call for international security assistance and encouraging movement towards a political agreement. On October 24, RFP leadership said that as part of its restructuring of the RFP Haiti platform, RFP would invite the Muslim community to join RFP, but the organization did not currently have a formal Muslim representative. Bilda, the president of the Council of Evangelical Churches of Haiti, which is not affiliated with RFP, said his group enjoyed and promoted "harmonious" cooperation with the government, leaders of other religions, and other Protestants. He offered the Organization for the Protection of *Restaveks* (a Creole term, thought of as derogatory, which describes children in indentured servitude), an interfaith effort to educate church leaders on how to support children in domestic servitude, as an example of strong interfaith collaboration.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives held regular conversations with government officials and religious leaders from Protestant, Catholic, Vodou, and Muslim communities to discuss the state of religious freedom and challenges religious groups faced. Embassy officials also met with representatives of RFP, the evangelical Social Mission of Haitian Churches, the Protestant Federation, and the National Council of Haitian Muslims.

Engagement included focused and interfaith group discussions on promoting religious tolerance, combating stigma, and engaging religious leaders on current events and the political crisis. The embassy engaged BOW Director General Souffrant on issues of religious freedom, including respect for religious diversity and the varied experiences of different faith communities with the BOW and clergy registration processes.

Embassy staff members routinely met with religious leaders from various faith backgrounds for their perspectives on the status of religious freedom for their communities.

In response to kidnappings throughout the country, including the high-profile kidnapping of 15 U.S. citizen missionaries in 2021, and the continued targeting of religious leaders, the embassy hosted a kidnapping prevention workshop in January with the Haitian National Police, which welcomed youth, religious leaders, and human rights leaders. The workshop focused on how to mitigate the risk of kidnapping and to maximize survival chances in the case of a kidnapping.

In November, the Department of Justice announced criminal charges against seven Haitian gang leaders for the kidnappings of numerous U.S. citizens, including Christian missionaries and children. The Department of State announced criminal charges against three gang leaders for the kidnappings of numerous U.S. citizens, including Christian missionaries and children. During her March 7-9 visit to the country, the Department of State's Assistant Secretary for Conflict and Stabilization Operations met with a variety of civil society representatives, including Pastor Bilda of the Council of Evangelical Churches, to gain their perspectives on insecurity and other challenges.

In April, President Biden selected Haiti as a country partner for implementation of the Global Fragility Act. To inform the 10-year *U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability* for the country, the U.S. government conducted more than 20 consultations with representatives from Catholic, Protestant, and Vodou faith-based organizations. The consultations directly contributed to the U.S. government's conceptualization of the drivers of instability in the country and their effect on religious groups and Haitians' religious freedom.

In December, the embassy promoted a social media campaign in English, French, and Kreyol to highlight the importance of religious freedom as the holiday season began. "Protecting religious freedom is a priority for the U.S. government. As the festive season approaches, U.S. Embassy Haiti is taking a moment to thank our partners who work to defend the rights of all Haitians to worship freely, regardless of what holidays they celebrate or don't," read one tweet.