

2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Haiti

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions. Any religious group seeking official recognition must receive government approval by law, a multistep process requiring documentary support. The Bureau of Worship, a unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), continued to provide some preferential treatment to the Roman Catholic Church, including a monthly stipend to Catholic priests. Vodou and Muslim representatives said their religious groups still struggled to gain support for registration and financial assistance for their educational institutions. Islamic groups said they continued to wait for official government recognition. From March to July, the government suspended all public gatherings of more than five persons, including religious services, to limit the spread of COVID-19. In March, police arrested 32 individuals of various religious affiliations throughout the country for violating the restrictions. In late July, religious leaders said some of the government's COVID-19 measures were unfair because businesses and government agencies were permitted to reopen, while houses of worship were not. Vodou and Islamic organizations said their exclusion as official COVID-19 relief implementing partners was discriminatory. In July, Christian groups objected to the government's new penal code, which enters into force within two years, because it included significant protections for LGBTI persons, the decriminalization of abortions, and the lowering of the age of sexual consent from 16 to 15.

In August, Hope Ministry reported what it considered the targeted killing of a Presbyterian pastor by unidentified individuals who shot the pastor and no other persons riding in a vehicle with the pastor. During the year, priests and pastors were among the hundreds of victims of gang-related kidnappings for ransom. In July, a Catholic Church representative said the country's general insecurity hindered the movement and flow of resources to support social initiatives. According to media, the Evangelical Baptist Union Mission of Haiti (UEBH) had to relocate church activities and ministries from Boulos, near Port au Prince, due to gang activity in the area. Various religious organizations, including the Haitian Pastors Conference, publicly condemned the country's continuing political and social instability. According to Vodou leaders, there were no killings of Vodou priests during the year, compared with one killing in 2019. As in previous years, Vodou leaders said non-Vodou followers often mischaracterized their religion as sinister. In September, Landy Mathurin, President of the Haitian Muslims National Council, said the population generally respected Muslims, including their right to wear the hijab.

In January, a Department of State official visited the country to discuss the importance of religious freedom and tolerance, particularly addressing registration issues. During the visit, he and U.S. embassy officials met with senior MFA officials and discussed fair and equal treatment for all religious groups. Throughout the year, embassy representatives regularly met with MFA officials and religious representatives, including through virtual meetings, to discuss religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.1 million (July 2020 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; 12.5 percent of the population claimed no religion. There are also small numbers of followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Other faiths, including Judaism, Islam, Rastafarianism, and Church of Scientology have small numbers of adherents. According to the same report, the Vodou faith is followed by approximately 3 percent of the population, although most observers state that is underestimated because many individuals practice Vodou secretly. According to the National Confederation of Haitian Vodou (KNVA) representatives, more than half of the population practices Vodou.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions. Under the law, the MFA is responsible for registering religious organizations, clergy, and missionaries of all denominations.

Religious institutions must register with the Bureau of Worship to receive government benefits, but there is no penalty for nonregistration. Even though registration would grant them standing in legal disputes and tax-exempt status, many religious groups do not comply. The Ministry of Justice authorizes registered religious leaders to issue official civil documents, such as marriage and baptismal certificates. To obtain government recognition, a religious group must provide information on its leaders' qualifications, a membership directory, and a list of the group's social projects. Registered religious groups must submit annual updates to the MFA.

To obtain a government-issued license, the prospective leader of a religious group must submit documents to the MFA, such as a religious studies diploma and a police certificate. Once the MFA confirms the applicant's eligibility for a license, a Ministry of Justice official authorizes 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 a specific number of bishops in the country with government consent. Under the accord, through the MFA's Bureau of Worship, the government provides a monthly stipend to Catholic priests. Catholic and Episcopalian bishops and the Protestant Federation's head have official license plates and carry diplomatic passports.

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

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

The three Muslim communities in the country – Sunni, Shia, and Ahmadiyya – individually continued to seek official recognition. According to the National Council for Haitian Muslims President, Landy Mathurin, MFA officials did not act on the Sunni and Shia community requests for registration pending since 2018. The MFA Religious Affairs director said only the Ahmadiyya followed official registration procedures, adding their application was still under review. To reach other Muslim groups, the MFA director said he would conduct registration drives outside Port au Prince instead of requiring applicants to come to the bureau's headquarters to complete the registration. No registration drives, however, occurred during the year.

The government continued to recognize only wedding ceremonies and baptisms conducted by government-certified officials. According to the MFA, there were 9,195 certified Protestant pastors, 704 certified Catholic priests, and two certified Vodou clergy at year's end. By year's end, the government still did not certify any Muslim clergy. Some Protestant leaders continued to call for more government regulation of unregistered churches and pastors.

According to media reports, starting in September, the government required all religious organizations to request a formal customs exemption when importing goods. According to local media, the decision was made to prevent widespread misuse of the government's customs exemption program.

During the 2020-21 school year, the Ministry of Education (MOE) disbursed 100 million gourdes (\$1.4 million) to religious schools: 50 million (\$698,000) to Catholic schools, 40 million to Protestant schools (\$559,000), and 10 million (\$140,000) to Anglican schools. On October 14, the MOE signed a three-year agreement with the Catholic Church, providing annual financial assistance for Catholic schools, especially in vulnerable areas identified by the government and civil society leaders.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government suspended all gatherings of more than five persons, including religious services, from March to July. According to news reports, police took 30 individuals into custody on March 22, including four Protestant pastors, for holding religious services in violation of government orders. The same day, police detained two individuals in Gressier, near Port au Prince, at a Vodou ceremony. In both instances, authorities released the individuals and did not formally charge them. In May, Minister for Foreign and Religious Affairs Claude Joseph urged religious leaders in the southern part of the country to convince followers to wear face masks and practice social distancing. After initial compliance, Christian groups, primarily Protestant, objected to the COVID-19 measures, stating that several factories and government agencies were allowed to reopen.

Vodou and Muslim groups said government officials excluded them as implementing partners for COVID-19 relief and other donor-financed projects. KNVA said the government dismissed local Vodou herbal remedies as COVID-19 preventive measures but explored cooperation with Madagascar's government to use an alleged herbal remedy, which Vodou practitioners said was a slight.

The Office of Citizen Protection (OPC) continued to advocate for students' religious freedom. As a result, the MOE rescheduled exams on weekdays instead of Saturdays, allowing full participation by Seventh-day Adventist students, according to the Church.

Some Muslim leaders said the government gave preference to Christian groups in its funding of development projects.

On September 22, the government, continuing past practices, installed religious representatives from the Vodou and Protestant communities on the Provisional Electoral Council, the country's elections administrative body. Unlike in previous years, a Catholic representative did not participate.

Although many religious leaders reported the government promoted tolerance and societal respect for religious freedom, non-Catholic religious leaders called for an end of government preference for the Catholic Church.

In July, the government adopted a new penal code that included significant protections for LGBTI persons, the decriminalization of abortion, and the lowering of the age of sexual consent from 16 to 15; the code was scheduled to enter into force after a two-year transition period. Christian group leaders, primarily from Protestant organizations, said the measures countered their beliefs and would require all clergy to perform same-sex marriages. According to the government, the new criminal code did not change the civil code that codified marriage as a union between a man and a woman. In July, the Haitian Protestant Federation and other Christian groups throughout the country launched petitions and peacefully marched, asking the government to repeal penal code articles related to LGBTI protections and the age of sexual consent. According to media, on July 26, approximately 6,000 citizens, predominantly Christian, participated in a peaceful march in Port au Prince against the new penal code. According to the Haitian Protestant Federation, the government did not consult religious groups before establishing the new penal code. In July, the Catholic Church released a statement against the measures. Representatives of the LGBTI community said they were concerned Christian groups would convince the government to reverse the new protections.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

During the year, priests and pastors were among the hundreds of victims of gang-related violence, including at least one targeted killing and kidnappings for ransom. According to Reformation Hope, in August, a Presbyterian pastor was likely the victim of a targeted killing, the only passenger in the vehicle whom unidentified individuals shot. According to reports, the pastor had received multiple death threats over several years. In July, a Catholic Church representative said the country's general insecurity hindered the movement and flow of resources to support social initiatives.

From July through December, there were reports of armed gangs occupying Maranatha High School, which is a part of the Mission Evangelical Baptist Union of Haiti's (UEBH) complex in Boulos, near Port au Prince. In November, Pastor Jacques Louis said the UEBH was forced to relocate church activities and ministries from Boulos due to violent gang activity in the area. A different Protestant leader said gangs continued to occupy Maranatha High School through the end of the year. During the year, various religious organizations, including Religions for Peace (RFP) and the Haitian Pastors Conference, publicly condemned the country's continuing political and social instability.

According to Vodou leaders, there were no killings of Vodou priests during the year, compared with one killing in 2019. Vodou clergy continued to state some practitioners experienced social stigmatization for their beliefs, saying some Christian pastors continued to consider the religion a sinister force. In June, KNVA representatives labeled the results of a 2017 survey on religious adherence, entitled *Mortality, Morbidity, and Use of Services*, as unreliable, stating more than 50 percent of the population practiced Vodou rather than the 3 percent estimated in the survey. The KNVA said Vodou followers often hid their adherence to the religion because it was falsely associated with evil. In June, KNVA President Carl Desmornes said misrepresentative Western media and false Christian teachings stigmatized the religion, causing followers to hide their adherence to it.

National Council for Haitian Muslims President Mathurin said Muslims were generally well respected in the country. In September, he said Muslim women were comfortable with wearing the hijab.

In an April 8 press conference, Vodou Priest Augustin St-Clou urged Vodou leaders to suspend traditional festivities coinciding with Easter to avoid the mass spread of COVID-19. In April, however, the celebration of some springtime Vodou traditions continued, including a Vodou rally in St. Louis

du Nord showing practitioners packed tightly together that was recorded in a viral social media video.

In September, Pierre Caporal, President of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, said many Adventists struggled to secure employment in both the private and public sectors because their religion forbids working on Saturdays. He said that while the OPC supported the Church in successfully challenging the weekend university admission exam schedule, lax enforcement continued.

RFP, whose members include representatives from the Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant Churches and the Vodou community, continued to meet, primarily focusing on COVID-19 relief efforts and promoting respect for religious diversity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

During a January visit, an official from the Department of State met with MFA officials and religious leaders to discuss the state of religious freedom and tolerance in the country, emphasizing the importance of fair and equal treatment for all religious groups. Throughout the year, embassy officials met regularly with the MFA and religious representatives, including through virtual meetings, to discuss religious freedom in the country, including religious tolerance and the impact of COVID-19 on religious communities.

ecoi.net summary:

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