

HAITI 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The 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 (MFA). 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 but also subjects it to greater governmental regulation. According to media, on April 15, police fired tear gas at dozens of individuals at Port-au-Prince's Church of St. Peter, the focal point of a nationwide event called "Mass for the Freedom of Haiti." On this date, the Church held hundreds of masses simultaneously across the country to protest the political crisis and kidnappings of priests during the government of then President Jovenel Moise. In May, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community completed registration with the BOW and later successfully registered its schools with the Ministry of Education (MOE), which allowed its students to take national exams. The larger Sunni and Shia Muslim communities remained unregistered with the BOW at year's end.

Media reported throughout the year that armed gangs increasingly targeted religious leaders and communities, including the killing or kidnapping of clergy and lay persons for ransom. According to leaders from all major religious communities, these cases were part of a wider trend of rising gang violence. Religious leaders said the issue was not discrimination against any particular religious group, but rather the belief among gangs that religious leaders held a prominent position in society and had access to personal funds or to money from wealthy foreign donors. Media reported that on October 16, 400 Mawozo gang members kidnapped 16 U.S. citizens and one Canadian (including five children) from the Amish Mennonite missionary group Christian Aid Ministries. Observers described the gang as "notoriously violent" as it took control of roads and communities in and around Port-au-Prince. By December 16, all 17 hostages had either been released or had escaped. Vodou leaders reported that Vodou practitioners were often forced to hide their identity due to fear of stigmatization, but they also expressed some optimism about greater tolerance and acceptance of Vodou, which is a government-recognized religion.

U.S. embassy officials held regular conversations with government officials and religious leaders to discuss the state of religious freedom and challenges faced by

religious groups. Embassy officials engaged BOW Director General Evens Souffrant on issues of religious freedom, including respect for religious diversity. Senior U. S. government officials visited Port-au-Prince in August, September, and October and met with leaders from a wide variety of religious communities to hear their perspectives on the impact of the political and security crises on religious freedom in the country. The embassy hosted a roundtable on May 7 with Islamic leaders to discuss their experiences as a new religious minority in the country. In October, embassy representatives met with leaders of the Vodou community to discuss their status in society and incidents of stigmatization. The Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs visited the country on September 30 and participated in an embassy-hosted roundtable with major leaders from the Catholic, Episcopalian, Mainstream Protestant (a technical term used in the country that refers to denominations belonging to the Protestant Federation), Evangelical Protestant, and Vodou communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.2 million (midyear 2021). 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, Vodouists 2 percent, and 11 percent do not state a religious preference. An estimated 60 percent of 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. The president of the National Council for Haitian Muslims states there are approximately 6,000 adherents across three branches of Islam – Sunni, Shia, and Ahmadiyya; only members of the Sunni and Shia communities belong to the council. The Jewish community has approximately 20 individuals.

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 BOW's primary responsibilities are to register religious and missionary organizations and certify the credentials of clergy of all denominations,

authorizing these operations in the country. The law also tasks the BOW to 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 the 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. The concordat affords privileges to the Catholic Church, including state protection and monthly stipends for some priests. It also provides the President the right of consent over the appointment of Catholic archbishops and bishops to their positions.

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

According to media, on April 15, police fired tear gas at dozens of individuals participating in a nationwide event called "Mass for the Freedom of Haiti." On this date, the Catholic Church held hundreds of masses simultaneously across the country to protest the deepening political crisis and rising insecurity during the government of then President Moïse. At the time, the 400 Mawozo gang had been holding 10 Catholic clergy for a period of four days. As a focal point for the event, 11 Catholic bishops led by Archbishop of Port-au-Prince Max Leroy Mesidor held Mass at the Church of St. Peter in Petion-Ville, a neighborhood in

Port-au-Prince. Authorities said they used tear gas after the conclusion of Mass to prevent the escalation of violence because nearby demonstrators had begun to burn cars. In the aftermath, Father Loudeger Mazile, spokesman for the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Haiti, asked everyone “to remain calm so that we can return to the route of democracy and development.”

Media also reported that on April 21, outside the National Palace, approximately 20 protesters, using a Vodou ritual, demonstrated against Moise-era overall insecurity and kidnappings of Catholic clergy. While protesters were conducting the ritual, police used tear gas in an attempt to disperse them.

Religious leaders publicly called for the cessation of violence during the year. In March, the Haitian Conference of Religious wrote an open letter calling on then President Moise to step down, citing what they said was rampant insecurity and injustice in the country, and it stated his administration represented a “descent into hell.” The letter said of the then Moise government, “The country is dying, the population is under a yoke, insecurity is rampant, the poorest are no longer able to sustain themselves, the population is in disarray and on the verge of desperation... [President Moise] has the duty to give quick and concrete answers to the requests of the people, starting with respect for the laws of the country.” The calls for government accountability expanded into major protests throughout the country during the entire month of March. A wide-reaching coalition of Protestant churches joined the growing protests after the Protestant Commission Against Dictatorship in Haiti and the Episcopal Conference of Haiti issued statements calling upon the population to “defend the life, future, and dignity of the Haitian people.” In April, Catholic leaders continued to publish statements and organize protests, but the focus was increasingly on the lack of government response to kidnappings and gang violence.

The 1860 concordat was a major subject of debate among religious leaders during the year. A Catholic leader said the 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 the concordat was a contract between two sovereign states that must be respected until it was reassessed. He added that his denomination valued its independence and had no interest in submitting its choices in religious leadership for government approval. Conversely, several other non-Catholic religious leaders raised concern about 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 “historical institutionalized predisposition” against them.

Vodou leaders said 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 Vodouists. One leader said, “The government should provide us financial support like they do for the Protestants, Catholics, and Episcopalians.”

Some Protestant religious leaders advocated for increased government regulation of religious groups. One leader stated, “There may be too much religious freedom,” and she said some religious leaders had long called for more stringent government standards for clergy registration. She said her concern was that self-described pastors with little religious training or accountability could prey on naive churchgoers. Another Protestant leader also commented on the need for stringent standards for clergy, citing COVID-19 misinformation. He said, “Hiding behind religious freedom, questionable leaders have preached against COVID-19 vaccination or even promoted unscientific cures. The government should do something.”

The BOW said that it continued to work with less established religious groups to facilitate their registrations, while defending what it said was the importance of a rigorous registration process. In May, the BOW granted an operating license to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, the smallest of the three Muslim communities in the country and the first to receive official status. According to the BOW, the Ahmadiyya community followed the same registration procedure that applied to all religious groups. The license allowed the MOE to register schools operated by the Ahmadiyya Muslim community so their students could take national exams. BOW Director General Souffrant said the transparency of the Ahmadiyya leadership during the registration process assisted the government in its decision to grant it a license. Sunni and Shia Muslim groups had not completed the procedures for registration and remained unregistered at year’s end. Sunni and Shia leaders cited what they called “the complex political environment” as a factor delaying their registration, with one leader stating, “The current de facto government is not likely to take it upon itself to recognize a religion that is nascent in the country.” BOW Director General Souffrant disagreed with this characterization, citing the successful example of the Ahmadiyya community. At year’s end, representatives from the Sunni and Shia communities did not cite specific procedural barriers that distinguished their experience from other groups.

Despite the benefits of registering, many religious groups and leaders chose to remain unregistered. According to the BOW, many religious groups and leaders preferred to remain unregistered 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. The Vodou leader also said Vodou clergy faced structural barriers to BOW registration because no degree-granting institution existed for Vodouists, and to create one would be contrary to their initiation rituals. Two Vodouists had earlier received government recognition, but these were the religion's highest-level officials, and they obtained the formal credentials required for BOW registration through their appointment to leadership positions within the National Confederation of Haitian Vodou.

According to the BOW, there were 9,195 certified Protestant pastors, 704 certified Catholic priests, and two certified Vodou clergy at year's end, representing no change from 2020. By year's end, the government had not certified any Muslim clergy, including from the newly registered Ahmadiyya community.

According to a Catholic leader, the Catholic Church felt "penalized" whenever a Protestant or Vodouist headed the MFA, of which the BOW is part. He stated that whenever the Catholic Church criticized government actions, the MFA retaliated by creating long delays for certification of clergy and other routine requests. Representatives of the Episcopal Church said the registration process was "reasonable and fair."

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 MOE stated that Catholic schools accounted for 15 percent (16 percent of total enrollment) of all schools in the education system, 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.

During the 2020-2021 school year, the MOE disbursed a total of 100 million gourdes (\$1 million) to religious schools through the National Education Fund: 50 million (\$501,000) to Catholic schools; 40 million to Protestant schools (\$401,000); and 10 million (\$100,000) to Episcopalian schools, which the ministry counted separately from Protestant schools. The MOE distributed funds roughly in proportion to each religious group's percent share of the student population. The Director General of the Office of the National Education Fund stated on November 22 that the same amounts would be disbursed for the 2021-2022 school year. 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. By year's end, there was no announcement regarding funding under this agreement.

The MOE continued to schedule national exams on weekdays instead of Saturdays, which allowed the full participation of Seventh-day Adventist students.

In September, Prime Minister Ariel Henry dismissed the incumbent members of the Provisional Electoral Council (CEP), seeking to replace them with what he called a "more credible" body of representatives. Upon dismissing the incumbent members, he invited representatives from civil society to nominate new ones. Among religious groups that received his request, the Catholic Church and Protestant Federation initially refused to participate in the process to join the CEP on the grounds that the representational institution had become too politicized. Government officials said they expected Catholic, Protestant, and Vodou communities to nominate members from their respective associations by year's end; however, at year's end, none of these communities had nominated new members. Government officials involved in the procedures for CEP formation stated that the nomination process for the Protestant representative to the CEP was particularly contentious because multiple Protestant coordinating bodies each saw themselves as the rightful representative of the country's Protestants.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders said that rising general insecurity was the issue with the most impact on religious freedom and that armed criminal gangs consistently targeted religious leaders and congregants during the year. Media reported gangs targeted

and killed several religious leaders during the year. Gang members killed Catholic priest Andre Sylvestre on September 8, after he completed a transaction at a bank in Cap Haitian. 400 Mawozo gang members killed prominent sculptor and *houngan* (male Vodou priest) Anderson Belony on October 12 during an attack on the artisanal village of Noailles in Croix-des-Bouquets. The gang also vandalized artists' studios, as well as Vodou shrines and sacred works. On September 26, unknown gunmen killed Baptist deacon Sylner Lafaille while he was entering his church in Morne A Tuff for Sunday morning services. They kidnapped his wife Marie Marthe Laurent Lafaille during the incident and subsequently released her on October 1, after receiving a ransom for an undisclosed amount. On November 11, unknown bandits in Croix-des-Bouquets believed to be 400 Mawozo gang members attempted to kill Baptist Pastor Stanis Stifinson in an attack that killed his young daughter. Pastor Stifinson and his young son escaped the attack and survived bullet wounds.

Religious leaders stated that the rising level of violence against them and their communities was a new phenomenon, resulting in numerous victims and significant challenges for the continuation of religious services. Religious leaders said religious communities were targeted not because of their religion, but rather because gangs believed religious organizations had access to money. Despite saying that they lived in constant fear, religious leaders stated that the cause was general insecurity, not any particular animosity towards them as religious leaders. One Vodou leader stated that Vodouists were less likely to be kidnapped due to the perception that Vodouists were poor, while many believed Protestant churches had rich foreign donors.

Media also reported kidnappings for ransom of numerous religious leaders and their congregants during the year. By year's end, police had not opened cases or made arrests in any of the crimes. According to media reports, on each occasion, gangs demanded ransoms in the order of millions of dollars and sometimes received payments for undisclosed amounts. On January 8, unknown gunmen kidnapped Sister Dachoune Severe, a nun from the Catholic congregation the Little Sisters of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, in front of her convent in Carrefour and held her until January 10. Media reports did not mention whether a ransom was paid. On April 1, unknown gang members kidnapped Seventh-day Adventist clergyman Audalus Estime and three congregants while they were performing music streamed live on Facebook, YouTube, and local radio from a stage in the Gilead Adventist Church in Diquini 63. They were held until April 5, when unknown individuals paid a ransom for an undisclosed amount. On April 11, 400 Mawozo gang members kidnapped 10 Catholic clergy, including a French

priest and nun, in Croix-des-Bouquets. Gang members released three of the hostages on April 23 and the others on April 30. Media reports did not mention whether ransoms were paid. The Catholic Church postponed numerous church services during the week following the kidnapping (April 11-20) and, after 10 days without progress on the release of the clergy, the Church expanded its protest to a three-day cessation of all activities in all Catholic institutions (April 21-23). The three-day cessation of activity included the full closure of churches, schools, universities, nonprofit organizations, and Catholic-owned businesses; essential workers at Catholic hospitals and clinics were exempt from the stoppage. On October 3, 400 Mawozo gang members kidnapped a Haitian-American pastor and two congregants of the Jesus Center Protestant church in Delmas 29 and held them until October 26, when unknown individuals paid a ransom for an unconfirmed amount. On October 9, unknown gang members kidnapped Pastor Eliodor Devariste of the Free Methodist Church of Parc Chretien in Delmas 28 and held him until October 11, when unknown individuals paid a ransom on his behalf. The Protestant community led protests as five more persons, some confirmed to be Protestant congregants from local churches, were kidnapped the same week from the same Delmas neighborhood. It was unclear how long these individuals were held or if ransoms were paid on their behalf.

On October 16, 400 Mawozo gang members kidnapped 16 U.S. citizens and one Canadian (including five children) from the Amish Mennonite missionary group Christian Aid Ministries (CAM) in Croix-des-Bouquets. The gang released two missionaries on November 21 for medical reasons and another three missionaries on December 5 after, according to the Haitian National Police, individuals unaffiliated with CAM paid a ransom. The remaining 12 missionaries escaped on December 16; conflicting reports later emerged in the media as to whether individuals unaffiliated to CAM had also paid ransoms on behalf of these victims prior to their escape.

Vodou leaders cited historical injustices and stated that there was still stigmatization against their religion. They said that some individuals in the Protestant community constituted a considerable concern to them and possibly a threat to their religious freedom. One Vodou leader said, “Some Protestant pastors preach that Vodou is an evil superstition, and they could ask their followers to attack us if we decide to organize marches. Our students who attend Protestant schools are forced to deny their identity.” Another Vodou leader said, “In the past, stigmatization was mostly from the Catholics, who led campaigns against us, but now it mostly comes from Protestant pastors.”

In October, National Council for Haitian Muslims President Landy Mathurin stated, “All Haitians are at risk of violence, not Muslims in particular.” He continued to say that Muslims did not face any stigmatization and were generally well respected in the country, with Muslim women feeling comfortable wearing the hijab in public. He said that many young persons tolerated and respected Islam because of some famous Haitian singers and musicians who converted to the faith.

Religions for Peace (RFP), an interfaith organization that included leaders from the Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Episcopalian, and Vodouist communities on its coordinating committee, led many efforts 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, the July 7 assassination of President Moïse, and an earthquake on August 14. RFP also acted from September 2019 until April 2021 as the chief facilitator of a peace dialogue that aimed to broker a solution to the Moïse-era political and insecurity crisis. RFP stated in October that it was exploring how a representative from the Muslim community could join the organization as a full council member. Although formal talks with the Muslim community had not begun by year’s end, Imam Abou Jahman of the Allahou Akbar Spiritual Center in Carrefour-Feuilles often cosigned RFP’s open letters. Unaffiliated with RFP, Pastor Jean Bilda, President of the Council of Evangelical Churches of Haiti, said his group enjoyed and promoted “harmonious” cooperation with the government, leaders of other religions, and other Protestants.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials held regular conversations with government officials and religious leaders to discuss the state of religious freedom and challenges faced by religious groups. Engagement included focused and interfaith group discussions on promoting religious tolerance, combating stigma, and understanding the rise in targeted attacks against religious leaders, congregations, and missionaries. 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.

Senior U. S. government officials visited Port-au-Prince in August, September, and October and met with leaders from a wide variety of religious communities to hear their perspectives on the impact of the political and security crises on religious freedom in the country. The Assistant Secretary of State for Western

Hemisphere Affairs visited the country on September 30 and participated in an embassy-hosted roundtable with seven major leaders from the Catholic, Episcopalian, Mainstream Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, and Vodou communities to discuss the wide reaching effects of political and security crises in the country. The Assistant Secretary raised the importance of religious freedom within the context of discussions on widespread gang violence and kidnapping. During this and other high level visits, religious leaders across every community discussed how gangs impeded their ability to congregate and practice their religions freely but clarified that gangs did not target any specific religious group.

The embassy discussed with religious leaders the challenges of operating in a COVID-19 environment and their views on how to best serve their congregants. The embassy hosted a roundtable on May 7 with Islamic leaders to discuss their experiences as a relatively new religious minority in the country. In October, embassy representatives met with leaders of the Vodou community to discuss their status in society and incidents of stigmatization.