

HAITI

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. embassy representatives routinely met with religious and civil society leaders to seek their views, including on religious freedom. All U.S. government programming in Haiti incorporates an inclusive approach of religious non-discrimination in order to foster development.

Section I. Religious Demography

A UN Population Fund census released in 2006 (based on 2003 data) lists the following religious demographics: 55 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 15 percent Baptist, 8 percent Pentecostal, and 3 percent Seventh-day Adventist. Other religious groups include Episcopalians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Muslims, Scientologists, and practitioners of Vodou (voodoo). Recent estimates indicate that half of the population practices Vodou. Vodou is often practiced along with other religions, most often Catholicism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The constitution provides for the establishment of laws to regulate the recognition and operation of religious groups. The administration and monitoring of religious affairs falls under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship. The Bureau of Worship, an office within the ministry, is responsible for registering churches, clergy, and missionaries.

While the status of Roman Catholicism as the official religion ended with the enactment of the 1987 constitution, an 1860 concordat that serves as the basis for relations between the Catholic Church (and its religious orders) and the state remains in effect. In many respects, Catholicism retains its traditional primacy among the country's religious groups. Currently, the Vatican approves a specific number of priests in the country, and the Haitian Bureau of Worship then chooses who will fill those posts. As part of the concordat, the government continues to provide a monthly stipend to Catholic priests. According to the Director General of the Bureau of Worship, the Bureau spends \$1.4 million a year to pay priests' salaries. The government also provides financial support to some Catholic schools.

Recognition by the Bureau of Worship affords religious groups standing in legal disputes, protects their tax-exempt status, and extends civil recognition to documents such as marriage and baptismal certificates. Goods imported for use by registered religious groups and missionaries are exempt from customs duties, and the government does not tax registered churches. Requirements for registration include information on qualifications of the group's leader, a membership list, and a list of the group's social projects. Registered religious groups must submit an annual report of their activities to the bureau.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Corpus Christi, the Feast of the Assumption, All Saints' Day, All Souls' Day, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The National Council of Muslims in Haiti applied for legal recognition of Islam as a religion, but continued to await approval at the end of the year. According to a Muslim contact, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship has repeatedly rejected the National Council of Muslim's application for recognition of Islam as a religion for several years and has not provided a rationale for its action. Each time the government rejects their appeal, it suggests the National Council of Muslims apply for recognition as something shy of a formal religion, such as a philosophy or a civil group. Currently, Muslims married in a religious ceremony do not receive the same government recognition accorded to Christian marriages and can only obtain government recognition through a civil court. According to the Bureau of Worship, Muslims already have some official recognition from the government.

The Bureau maintains three separate offices to handle administrative issues for Catholics, non-Catholic Christians and Muslims, and Vodou.

Most faith-based humanitarian groups arriving after the January 2010 earthquake remained undocumented, since government offices were closed for months following the earthquake. Although legally required to register, many nondenominational Christian groups and Vodou practitioners operated informally and did not seek official recognition. There were no reports of this requirement restricting the operation of a religious group.

Organized missionary groups and missionaries affiliated with a wide range of religious groups operated privately funded hospitals, orphanages, schools, and clinics. Foreign missionaries often entered as tourists and submitted paperwork similar to that submitted by domestic religious groups to the Bureau of Worship. Delays often occurred in the issuing of residence permits, but it appears that bureaucratic problems were the primary cause.

Prisoners and detainees were generally permitted religious observance and could request to see a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest, a Vodou leader, or a Muslim cleric. During the first few months of the year, however, the government maintained a ban on personal and religious visitors in prisons in an attempt to quell the spread of cholera. The government lifted these restrictions after the infection rate stabilized. While prisoners and detainees had the legal right to religious observance, the government did not regularly provide for religious services at major incarceration centers such as the National Penitentiary. Some prisons had regular religious services provided by volunteers.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Religion plays a prominent role in society. While society generally was tolerant of the variety of religious practices, citizens' attitudes toward Vodou ranged from acceptance as part of the culture to rejection as incompatible with Christianity.

From January to September, the National Network for the Defense of Human Rights, a nongovernmental organization, reported 28 Vodou priests or Vodou practitioners were killed after being accused of creating a powder to spread cholera. There was little or no follow-up from law enforcement authorities.

Reports of cholera-related killings of Vodou practitioners had ceased by year's end.

Unidentified perpetrators broke into and vandalized the main Catholic cathedral in Cap Haitien the night of August 6 and early morning August 7, leaving leaflets with slogans such as "The Catholic Church is the work of Satan." There were similar incidents at churches in the smaller northern towns of Port Magot and Limonade the same night. Both Catholic and Protestant authorities stated that the incidents were likely a manifestation of longstanding tensions between Catholics and Protestants.

Unidentified perpetrators broke into and vandalized the Masonic Lodge in Cap Haitien between the evening of September 3 and early morning September 4. The vandals ransacked the Masonic Lodge and left leaflets accusing the freemasonry of "working for Lucifer." The Haitian National Police is investigating the incident. The Masonic Lodge in Haiti is often perceived as being affiliated with the Catholic Church.

UNICEF partnered throughout the year with Religions for Peace and the Interfaith Council of Christian, Muslim, and Vodou Groups to conduct a cholera awareness campaign. The partnership included a music festival focused on raising cholera awareness, as well as ongoing training for leaders, who were then expected to train members of their groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives routinely met with religious and civil society leaders to seek their views, including on religious freedom. All U.S. government programming in Haiti incorporated an inclusive approach of religious non-discrimination in order to foster development.