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[Home](#) > ... > Haiti

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Haiti

[IN THIS SECTION /
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY](#)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 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 a 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, although the government has not exercised this right in recent years.

While religious leaders representing 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. In April, the local news site *Vant Bef Info* published an editorial condemning what it called government complicity in the country's continuing insecurity and economic downturn, which editors said prevented citizens from celebrating Easter traditions. In March, the Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince called on authorities to protect worshippers and places of worship after armed groups broke into a church during Mass, kidnapping several worshippers and leaving numerous

others with serious injuries. In September, the Catholic Haitian Conference of Religious denounced the “indifference of political leaders” in the face of “an abandoned people... seeking nothing more than to live in dignity and peace.” A Catholic priest working in Port-au-Prince’s Cite Soleil neighborhood said he believed continuing gang violence across the capital was a “serious impediment” to the free practice of all religions, “not just for Catholics or Christians.”

Religious leaders emphasized that rising general insecurity remained the issue that exerted the most significant impact on religious freedom. During the year, armed criminal gangs continued to kidnap religious leaders and congregants for ransom. Protestant leaders said churches’ access to financial resources prompted gangs to demand higher “protection” payments from their leadership, and Catholic leaders said the historical perception that the Catholic Church was wealthy made Catholic clergy a target for kidnapping. In July, media outlets reported gang members kidnapped a nurse working for the Christian organization El Roi Haiti, along with her child. They were released for ransom 13 days later. In August, Pastor Marcorel “Marco” Zidor of the Evangelical Church of the Pool of Bethesda led several hundred parishioners to a gang-controlled village north of Port-au-Prince. Armed with machetes and sticks, parishioners said they were going to “stop” gang violence. When the crowd arrived, members of the Canaan gang, led by Jeff Larose, killed at least seven parishioners and kidnapped and physically abused dozens more. On August 29, authorities opened criminal proceedings against Zidor and closed his church.

U.S. 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. During his March visit to Port-au-Prince, the Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs met with Archbishop Max Leroy Mesidor, the Catholic Archbishop of Port-au-Prince, to discuss the Catholic Church’s role in the continuing political dialogue process to obtain an inclusive political consensus that would result in free and fair elections. Embassy officials also met with representatives of the interreligious organization Religions for Peace (RFP), the evangelical Social Mission of Haitian Churches, the Protestant Federation, the National Confederation of Haitian Vodou, and the National Council of Haitian Muslims.

Section I.

Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.6 million (midyear 2023). 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, including evangelical Protestants, 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, mostly converts who were born 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, continuing 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, protected class

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 continued to assert the government did not restrict their religious freedom, many religious leaders said the government's failure to maintain security and order hampered their communities' abilities to practice their religions freely. On April 7, local news site *Vant Bef Info* published an editorial condemning what it called government complicity in the continuing insecurity and economic downturn, which editors said prevented citizens from celebrating Easter traditions. In March, the Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince called on authorities to protect worshippers and places of worship after armed men broke into a church during Mass, kidnapping several worshippers and leaving numerous others with serious injuries. On September 15, the Catholic Haitian Conference of Religious released a letter denouncing the "indifference of political leaders" in the face of "an abandoned people...

seeking nothing more than to live in dignity and peace.” One Catholic priest working in Cite Soleil said he believed continuing gang violence across the capital was a “serious impediment” to the free practice of all religion, “not just for Catholics or Christians.”

The High Transition Council (HCT), a government body designed to guide the government through the political crisis following the assassination of President Jovenel Moise in July 2021, included a representative of the religious sector. On January 17, the Council of Ministers appointed Pastor Calixte Fleuridor, president of the Protestant Federation of Haiti, to serve on the HCT. Non-Protestant religious groups said they regretted there was not broader religious representation, although some Christian leaders agreed with Fleuridor’s selection. Some Protestant leaders called for Fleuridor to step down as president of the Protestant Federation and to replace him with someone who could “more effectively and broadly” represent the religious sector; as of year’s end, he had not done so. The Provisional Electoral Council, the body that governs elections, had not been formed by year’s end, but it was also expected to include members representing both Christian and Vodou groups.

On November 3, Pastor Clement Joseph, former RFP secretary general and leader of the Social Mission of Haitian Churches, a group of 14 Protestant churches, said he believed the security situation and the high level of impunity in the country “made any religious freedom impossible.” “The people have been totally abandoned by their government,” he said. “To have faith and freedom of religion, you must first have basic liberty. The people do not have even that.”

On November 2, Pastor Jean Bilda Robert, the president of the Council of Evangelical Churches of Haiti, emphasized that, while the government had not infringed on any individual religious rights or limited the degree to which citizens could practice their religion, the sociocultural situation more broadly, including high levels of violence and impunity, prevented many persons from freely practicing their faith.

The 2022 allegations that the Episcopal Church of Haiti was involved in the illegal importation of weapons continued to be a focus for authorities. On October 3, the chief prosecutor of Port-au-Prince dismissed charges against two priests indicted in the case but referred others to a criminal court for further proceedings. On September 22, the Episcopal Church of Haiti established an oversight body, whose six members would help provide greater control over church operations and demonstrate the church’s commitment to justice.

The 1860 concordat between the government and the Holy See continued to be a major subject of debate among religious leaders during the year. A Catholic leader said the Catholic

Church adhered to the concordat because it was legally bound to do so under the country's legal system, and it had a strong historical precedent. The president of the National Council of Haitian Muslims said he did not believe the concordat affected Muslims' freedom of religion. Several other non-Catholic religious leaders, however, raised concerns regarding the concordat. One Protestant leader said it was proof of "unequal treatment" between the Catholic Church and other faiths, which put other religious groups at a comparative disadvantage. Vodou leaders said it reflected longstanding government and societal preference for the Catholic Church over other religions, as well as a major piece of a longstanding history of discrimination and persecution against Vodouists.

Vodou leaders continued to say that while continuing education and awareness campaigns across the country made them hopeful for the future, prejudice against them, especially in rural areas, still lingered and often made Vodouists fearful to practice openly. A representative of the National Confederation of Haitian Vodou stated that a majority of residents in rural areas were Vodouists, but they chose to practice their customs indirectly through medicine, art, and music. Vodou leaders said the government could do more to combat continuing 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, in particular, following a march led by Pastor Zidor in August to protest gang violence, during which gang members killed, tortured, or kidnapped dozens of parishioners. After the incident, citizens took to social media to condemn the "uneducated" and "irresponsible" nature of Zidor's actions as leader of his church and called on the government to investigate him and revoke his license. On August 29, authorities opened criminal proceedings against Zidor and closed his church.

The BOW said it continued to work with less established religious groups to facilitate their registrations while defending its rigorous registration process, although it said continuing insecurity presented serious challenges to reaching out to religious groups across the capital. As of December 31, the BOW reported that no new religious groups had registered during the year. BOW Director General Evans Souffrant said he believed there were no serious issues with religious discrimination in the country, and outreach to all faiths remained a priority for the BOW. According to the BOW, nationwide insecurity also remained a significant hindrance to its efforts to register religious leaders during the year. Sunni and Shia Muslim groups had not completed the procedures for registration and remained unregistered at year's end. According to the BOW, despite the benefits of registering, many religious groups and leaders

continued to choose 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 with 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. Vodou leaders also said they believed this nonhierarchical structure made it more difficult for Vodouists to gain representation in other government bodies, such as the Provisional Electoral Council or the High Transition Council. Following the 2022 death of Euvonie Georges Auguste, a *manbo* (female Vodou priest) who had led the National Confederation of Haitian Vodou for many years, Jackson Pierre Louis was appointed by confederation leadership early in the year as her interim 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 year's end, the government had not certified any Sunni, Shia, or Ahmadiyya Muslim imams.

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. According to Imam Mathurin, the Muslim community had three schools located in the metropolitan Port-au-Prince area, none of which received MOE funding. One of the schools operated in a gang-controlled area, and as a result, he said it was not open full-time.

During the 2022-23 school year, the MOE did not disburse funding to any religious schools, according to Catholic and Protestant leaders. 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 remained the issue with the most impact on religious freedom. Armed criminal gangs continued to kidnap religious leaders and congregants during the year for ransom or extortion. Protestant leaders said churches' access to financial resources led gangs to demand higher "protection" payments from their leadership. Catholic leaders also said the historical perception of the Catholic Church as having access to wealth made Catholic clergy a target for kidnapping. On November 2, Pastor Bilda said the high levels of insecurity, and fear of being targeted for kidnapping or looting, prevented him and many other religious leaders from accessing their churches or other religious facilities in various parts of Port-au-Prince.

Local and international media reported Pastor Zidor led several hundred parishioners of his church, the Evangelical Church of the Pool of Bethesda, to gang-controlled Canaan, a village north of Port-au-Prince. Armed with machetes and sticks, parishioners said they were going to "stop" gang members. When the crowd arrived, at least seven parishioners were killed and dozens more were kidnapped and tortured by members of the Canaan gang, led by Jeff Larose. Gang members filmed and widely circulated videos of the violence.

Media outlets reported gangs kidnapped or killed several religious leaders or followers during the year, reflecting the high rate of kidnappings by gangs across Port-au-Prince. On February 7, gang members kidnapped Father Antoine Macaire Christian Noah, a Catholic missionary priest from Cameroon. He later escaped captivity unharmed. On February 13, local press reported gang members kidnapped Flambert Louis Jean, Bucharra Jeantilus, and Gerta Celestin in front of the First Baptist Church in Port-au-Prince, where they were parishioners. They were released for ransom on February 28. On March 10, members of a local criminal gang kidnapped Father Jean-Yves Medidor, a missionary of the Clerics of Saint Viator in Croix-des-Bouquets; he was released for ransom 10 days later. On March 26, local press reported gang members kidnapped two individuals while they were on their way to church. The gang members posed as Haitian National Police (HNP) officers, and when the individuals stopped, the gang members kidnapped them. On July 27, local and international media reported Alex

Dorsainvil, a nurse working for the Christian organization El Roi Haiti, was kidnapped along with her child. They were released for ransom 13 days later.

According to media reports, gang members became increasingly bold in their invasions of churches and other religious spaces. On May 14, an armed group attacked a Vodou ceremony in a private residence in Onaville, north of Port-au-Prince. Death tolls varied across media reporting, but at least six persons were killed, including manbo Mireille Barthelemy. The KNVA denounced the violent incident. On July 30, armed gang members invaded the Altagrace Church in Delmas during a service, where they kidnapped a female member of the congregation. On October 8, local media outlets and Pastor Julio Volcy reported that armed gang members stormed the premises of Rendez-Vous Christ Church, kidnapped Volcy's security guard, Junior Makenson Flerzil, and killed an HNP officer. Flerzil was released for ransom six days later. Pastor Joseph, leader of the Social Mission of Haitian Churches, said gang members concealed themselves within the crowd of worshippers to infiltrate the church more easily, compounding the terror inflicted on the group as they worshipped.

On October 14, local media and religious contacts reported armed gang members attacked and looted a church and school associated with the Salesians of Don Bosco in La Saline. A Catholic priest who operates several humanitarian facilities around the Port-au-Prince area said a nearby orphanage run by Catholic sisters was also affected by gang violence during the attack on the Salesian church, and children in the orphanage were forced to flee.

The nationwide vigilante movement in response to gang violence also affected the Vodou community. On August 17, local media reported a group of vigilantes in Fort Jacques executed "Ti Junior," a local *houngan*, or Vodou priest, whom they accused of being a spy for the Kraze Barye gang.

During the year, many religious leaders called for peace or organized protests against insecurity. On July 9, for example, Pastor Gregory Toussaint of the Tabernacle of Glory Church organized marches across the country and internationally to protest gang violence and the involvement of government authorities and to seek more support from the international community. Others said they worked to facilitate a sense of community in the face of violence when possible.

Religious leaders also played a major role in providing services and protection to citizens caught in gang-controlled or gang-affected areas. In the Port-au-Prince areas of La Saline and Cite Soleil, for example, religious orders provided education, emergency food supplies, and medical care throughout the year. Father Tom Hagan, leader of the Catholic NGO Hands

Together, successfully negotiated a truce between Cite Soleil gang leaders in early July. Hagan credited his longstanding relationship with each of the gang leaders and the bonds of trust as major contributors to the success of the truce. Although intergang violence erupted again in Cite Soleil in late September, Hagan reported he continued attempting to broker peace and foster dialogue among gang leaders to prevent further violence. Father Richard Frechette, a Catholic priest and physician, also provided medical care and community services in the Tabarre neighborhood of Port-au-Prince through the St. Luke Foundation for Haiti.

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 posed a threat to their religious freedom. Vodou leaders also said negative stereotypes that Vodou was linked to gang activity, or that gang members used Vodou practices to make themselves “bulletproof,” fueled negative perceptions of, and incited, violence against Vodou practitioners.

Vodou leaders also spoke about the importance of interfaith dialogue for eliminating stigma between groups and promoting religious freedom. They called for interfaith cooperation to address continuing security and economic problems in the country; however, some leaders said the death of Euvonie Georges Auguste, a manbo who had led the National Confederation of Haitian Vodou for many years, had limited the credibility of the Vodou representation in interreligious spaces.

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. On November 3, Pastor Joseph, RFP’s former secretary general, said the organization had reduced its activities during the year, but he stressed that interreligious dialogue continued at a very high level. Also, on November 3, Pastor Bilda said the group continued to meet informally and facilitate dialogue, especially among Catholic, Protestant, and Vodou groups.

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. During his March visit to Port-au-Prince, the Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs met with Archbishop Max

Leroy Mesidor, the Catholic Archbishop for Port-au-Prince, to discuss the Catholic Church's role in the continuing political dialogue process to obtain an inclusive political consensus that would result in free and fair elections.

During the year, embassy officials met with representatives of RFP, the evangelical Social Mission of Haitian Churches, the Protestant Federation, the National Confederation of Haitian Vodou, and the National Council of Haitian Muslims. Embassy staff routinely met with religious leaders from various faith backgrounds to discuss their perspectives on the status of religious freedom for their communities, including gangs' kidnapping of religious leaders and followers, follow-up efforts on specific incidents, and the impact of general insecurity on their congregations and communities.

Embassy staff also met regularly with religious leaders conducting development and peacebuilding work in gang-controlled and gang-affected areas around Port-au-Prince. These religious leaders provided important insights for embassy officials' understanding of life and the status of religious freedom, including access to churches and other religious sites, in parts of Port-au-Prince otherwise unreachable due to gang violence.

In December, the embassy promoted a social media campaign in English, French, and Haitian Creole to highlight the importance of religious freedom during the holidays.

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