



The INSTITUTE on Religion and Public Policy
Religious Freedom in Haiti

Executive Summary

(1) Haiti has come a long way in recent years towards protecting the human rights of its people, including Article 30 of their constitution which provides the freedom to exercise any faith and conviction in Haiti that does not compromise criminal law. Though institutionalized persecution is reportedly nonexistent, instances of religious violence have occurred as recently as 2010. Recent instances have been increasingly sporadic, but noteworthy, with the latest resulting in the murder of 45 Vodou doctors.

The INSTITUTE on Religion and Public Policy

(2) Nominated multiple times for the Nobel Peace Prize, THE INSTITUTE on Religion and Public Policy is an international, interreligious nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. THE INSTITUTE works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. THE INSTITUTE encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

Religious Demographics/Historical Background

(3) The religious population in Haiti includes Roman Catholic's (80 percent), Baptists (10 percent), Pentecostals (4 percent), Seventh Day Adventists (1 percent), Episcopalians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, The church of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons), Muslims, Scientologists and practitioners of Vodou (Voodoo). An estimated half of the population practices Vodou and these practices largely occur in conjunction with people indentifying with and practicing other faiths.¹

(4) Since independence in 1804, religion has been involved in many of the political and social upheavals that the Haitian people have endured.²

(5) With a concordat agreement in 1860 between the Holy See of the Catholic Church and the republic of Haiti came an influx of foreign priests and the development of the infrastructure of Catholicism. A heavy imbalance between priests of Haitian descent and foreign priests continued for decades. In 1924 less than three percent of priests in Haiti were Haitian born, in 1957 when Francois Duvalier was elected president the number still hadn't risen above 25 percent.³

(6) The U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 contributed to a strong nationalist sentiment in the republic of Haiti. Here the origins of a struggle between Nationalism and Imperial influence developed, this struggle later extended into disdain for the imbalance of the clergy in the Catholic Church and a new look at the importance of Vodou in the preservation of a Haitian national identity.⁴

¹ CIA World FactBook- Haiti. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ha.html>

² Politics and Religion in Haiti, 402. Nicholls, David.

³ Politics and Religion in Haiti, 402. Nicholls, David.

⁴ Politics and Religion in Haiti, 400. Nicholls, David

(7) The 1940's brought with them an attempt by Catholic leaders to remove superstition from the Haitian countryside. This resulted in the destruction of religious artifacts and forced renunciation of Vodou beliefs. Academic Supporters of Vodou resisted this mistreatment and argued that Vodou could not be simply labeled superstition and gotten rid of. Jean Price-Mars a Haitian writer and later diplomat made a distinction between fetishism and animism. Fetishism is the worship of material objects, and animism is the worship of spirits who have the ability to become incarnate in material objects. Animism is the basis for the Vodou religion and traces its roots back to Africa, religions of this sort are widely held and ancient, they contribute to African cultural history. Other supporters of Vodou at this time claimed that Vodou was no more superstition than western religions. Nationalism also played a role in this debate because Vodou was one of the few traditions that the people of Haiti had that was free of western influence.⁵

(8) By the late 1950's the best schools in Haiti were Catholic schools and the vast majority of the elite and sub-elite classes recognized themselves as Catholic and denounced the practice of Vodou. Vodou continued to be practiced by the lower class and rural people, while both classes as well as the middle class had instances of people holding Catholic beliefs and practicing Vodou simultaneously.⁶

(9) In 1957, Francois Duvalier was elected president of the Republic of Haiti. Duvalier is an infamous character in Haitian history; he violently consolidated power over the Vodou leaders of the nation and then began a campaign to "indigenize" the Catholic Church.⁷ This attempt included dissolution of schools/teachers unions and the expulsion of numerous clergy including Bishop Robert of Gonaives, one of the original instigators of the attacks on superstition that occurred in the 1940's. Under Duvalier terrorism became an issue in Haiti; some of the terrorism was linked with the Catholics in country and those that had been exiled. By 1965, Duvalier was satisfied with the progress he had made in reducing the political influence of the Church. In the same time period the Catholic Church underwent a policy change towards encouraging the incorporation of native priests in local parishes. With the mounting terrorism in Haiti and the political climate as it was, an agreement was reached in 1966.⁸

(10) The Duvalier regime began a tradition of corrupt rule in Haiti. Both Francois Duvalier and later Jean-Claude Duvalier relied on the use of paramilitary forces to keep order. These forces amounted to hired thugs and drugs traffickers that were employed by the leader to balance coup attempts by the army. This undermining of the judicial and executive branches of government in Haiti led to long sustaining paranoia in Haitian leadership and instability in the nation.⁹

(11) In 1986 the Duvalier reign over Haiti came to an end when Jean-Claude Duvalier, the son of Francois Duvalier, fled Haiti in lieu of a domestic social uprising and international pressure to avoid bloodshed.¹⁰

(12) Immediately following the exile of Jean-Claude Duvalier there was violence against the practitioners of Vodou. The attacks included the destruction of homes and temples along with over 100 deaths by burning, machete and other means. The motivation for these attacks came partly from a desire for

⁵ Politics and Religion in Haiti, 404. Nicholls, David

⁶ Politics and Religion in Haiti, 404. Nicholls, David

⁷ Militarization without Civil War: The Security Dilemma and Paramilitary Regime Consolidation in Haiti, 3. Carey, Henry.

⁸ Politics and Religion in Haiti, 404-6. Nicholls David.

⁹ Militarization without Civil War, 4. Carey, Henry.

¹⁰ Duvalier Flees Haiti to End Family's 38 Years in Power; General Leads New Regime; Jamaica said to Play a Key Role in Persuading Duvalier to Leave. Gwertzman, Bernard.

retaliation for the unanswered crimes of the TonTon Macoutes, a paramilitary force organized by Francois Duvalier. A significant number of the attacks were religious in nature, coming from protestant groups who had been preaching for years against the evil of Vodou and found an opportunity to purge it from the country. The Haitian government neither instigated nor intervened in the commencement of these atrocities.¹¹

(13) While less frequent, sporadic attacks on Vodou continue today in Haiti. These attacks often occur in association with accidental deaths and calamities that citizens view as a result of Vodou practices.

Introduction to Legal Status

(14) The Haitian constitution of 1987 provides for freedom of belief and expression. Article 28 of the Constitution states that "Every Haitian has the right to express his opinions freely on any matter by any means he chooses." Sub-Article 28-3 states that any impingement on the rights of a Haitian's freedom of expression will fall under criminal law. Article 30 provides the freedom to exercise any faith and conviction in Haiti with the provision that such exercise does not disturb law and order. Article 30-1 prohibits any forced conversion into a belief structure that contradicts the convictions of an individual. Article 30-2 provides for the conditions of official registration of any religion to be determined by further laws.¹² As of 2010 these conditions include: providing information to the Bureau of Religious Affairs concerning the qualifications of the group's leader, a list of members and a list of social projects that the group has engaged in and is planning. Also, a report of their practices must be submitted by each religious group to the Bureau. The benefits of government recognition include: tax exempt status, legal standing in the courts, civil verification of marriage and baptismal certificates, and exemption from duties on imported goods.¹³

(15) Catholic and major Protestant organizations have registered with the bureau. The National Council of Muslims in Haiti has submitted an application for recognition. Various Vodou groups as well as smaller unaffiliated Christian groups continue to operate without formal recognition although no law exists prohibiting their registration.¹⁴

(16) Article 297 of the constitution documents the repulsion of previously held laws that have been deemed in violation of human rights. Among these laws include the 1935 law on superstitious beliefs, and the 1967 law banning the importation of religious doctrines.¹⁵

Specific Instances of Religious Persecution

(17) Recent events in Haiti typically emerge from tension between evangelical groups and practitioners of Vodou. In the wake of Haiti's devastating earthquake that took place January 12th 2010, the tension has increased.

(18) After the earthquake that struck Haiti in 2010, the devastation was worsened further by a cholera outbreak that took the lives of over 2,000 Haitians. In the southwest of Haiti, mobs attributed the spread of cholera to the practices of Vodou doctors. The mobs turned violent and the murder of reportedly 45 Vodou doctors took place. The minister of Communications for Haiti Marie-Laurence

¹¹ Voodoo Under Attack in Post Duvalier Haiti. Simons, Marlise.

¹² Haitian Constitution. <http://pdpa.georgetown.edu/constitutions/haiti/haiti1987.html>.

¹³ International Religious Freedom Report. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148761.htm>

¹⁴ International Religious Freedom Report. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148761.htm>

¹⁵ Haitian Constitution. <http://pdpa.georgetown.edu/constitutions/haiti/haiti1987.html>.

Lassegue claimed that the violence was a result of misinformation and the lack of education that has long plagued the country. It is important to note that these acts were committed by civilians and in contradiction of law.¹⁶

(19) Another Instance of persecution involves unequal distribution of aid from religious organizations since the earthquake. This aid discrimination is made evident in a quote from Pastor Frank Amedia of Touch Heaven Ministries based in Miami in reference to aiding practitioners of Vodou he expressed his position

(20) “We would give food to the needy in the short term but if they refused to give up Voodoo, I'm not sure we would continue to support them in the long term.” While not illegal, disdain of this sort is a typical example of negative Christian opinions on Vodou.¹⁷

(21) The government of Haiti had no records of religious prisoners, forced conversion or religious violence in 2010. Christian attitudes towards Vodou vary between belief in the compatibility of the two religions and condemnation.¹⁸

U.S. Foreign Policy towards Haiti

(22) The United States supports Haitian development with bilateral resource investment and also takes the lead internationally by organizing multi-lateral interaction through the United Nations and the Organization of the American States (OAS). The United States promotes the development of Haiti by strengthening the economy and capacity of the government, and alleviating poverty and illiteracy.¹⁹

(23) Maintaining good relations with Haiti is important to the U.S. because of Haiti's proximity to the U.S. and the legal and illegal migration that occurs.²⁰

(24) The most recent and substantial aid from the United States of America to Haiti has come in the aftermath of the 7.3 magnitude earthquake that hit just off of the coast of Haiti in 2010. Organizations involved in the aid effort include The U.S. Agency for International Development, Department of State, Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Health and Human Services and the Treasury Department. Total aggregate expenditure for the aid effort exceeds 2 billion dollars with over 1 billion coming from the federal government and a reported 1.4 billion coming from private donations.²¹

(25) United States aid to Haiti has come in two forms. Those include immediate efforts to reduce the effects of the earthquake and investment in long term development for the Haitian people, economy, and government. The immediate efforts took a comprehensive approach.²²

¹⁶ Evangelical crowd attacks Voodoo practitioners in Haiti, as religious tensions rise. The Canadian Press.

¹⁷ Evangelical crowd attacks Voodoo practitioners in Haiti, as religious tensions rise. The Canadian Press.

¹⁸ International Religious Freedom Report. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148761.htm>.

¹⁹ Background Note: Haiti. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/1982.htm>

²⁰ Haiti: From Rescue and Relief to Reconstruction. http://www.usaid.gov/ht/docs/eqdocs/usg_factsheets/USG_relief_to_reconstruction.pdf

²¹ Haiti: From Rescue and Relief to Reconstruction. http://www.usaid.gov/ht/docs/eqdocs/usg_factsheets/USG_relief_to_reconstruction.pdf

²² Haiti: From Rescue and Relief to Reconstruction. http://www.usaid.gov/ht/docs/eqdocs/usg_factsheets/USG_relief_to_reconstruction.pdf

(27) U.S. organization put seven search and rescue teams on the ground as well as employing medical teams that performed hundreds of surgeries. They collaborated with the United Nations World Food Program to provide food to 3.5 million people as well as providing 1.3 million people with daily drinking water. Additionally, forty million dollars went to lessen the effects of the Cholera outbreak that came after the earthquake. This outbreak took the lives of over 2,000 people. The money went to diagnosis and treatment centers as well as millions of IV rehydration kits. Fourteen million dollars went to the support of the November 2010 elections in Haiti. These funds were allocated to ballot materials and the employment of Election Day observers to oversee voting and report on mistreatment.²³

(30) Resources allocated for long term development came under four categories.

(31) Infrastructure and Energy was one category. This included spending on transportation to accompany agricultural development, investment in developing the electricity industry, and building permanent housing for internally displaced persons (IDPs). Food and Economic Security was another category. This involved increasing the efficiency of agricultural output which accounts for 25% of Haiti's GDP,²⁴ as well as the development of Micro, Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (MSMEs). These enterprises serve to stabilize the economy and provide employment. Additionally, integrating agricultural production with natural resource management techniques and providing access for farmers to credit and technological advances are included in this category. Health and other Basic Services was the third category mentioned. Health and basic services included the setting up of epidemiology centers, the training of community health advocates and the establishment of care facilities for the disabled. The fourth category of long term development was Governance and Rule of Law. This section consisted of the training and enlargement of the Haitian National Police in order to promote order and counteract the rising instances of sexual violence occurring in IDP camps, and the strengthening of key justice institutions in order to increase the efficiency of the judicial process.²⁵

(34) The United States continues to communicate the need to advance the security of religious freedom in Haiti through its general program to promote civil rights.²⁶

Conclusion

(35) The Haitian government has provided for religion freedom in their constitution. In recent history, they have had no reported cases of institutionalized religious discrimination. Civil tensions between Christians (especially evangelicals) and practitioners of Vodou still occur sporadically. An effort to educate the public about the practices of Vodou may help to encourage further Vodou involvement in the political process as well as deter acts of violence caused by misinformation.

²³ Haiti: From Rescue and Relief to Reconstruction.

http://www.usaid.gov/ht/docs/eqdocs/usg_factsheets/USG_relief_to_reconstruction.pdf

²⁴ CIA World FactBook: Haiti. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ha.html>

²⁵ Haiti: From Rescue and Relief to Reconstruction.

http://www.usaid.gov/ht/docs/eqdocs/usg_factsheets/USG_relief_to_reconstruction.pdf

²⁶ International Religious Freedom Report. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148761.htm>