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Haiti

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND LABOR

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 10,714 square miles and shares the Caribbean island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. Its estimated population is 7 to 8 million.

While precise statistics are unavailable, it is estimated that approximately 80 percent of citizens are Roman Catholic. Most of the remainder belong to a variety of Protestant denominations. The largest of these are Baptist (10 percent) and Pentecostal (4 percent). Other significant non-Catholic Christian groups include Methodists, Episcopalians, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Adventists, and Orthodox. There also are many nondenominational Christian congregations. The percentage of Protestants generally is acknowledged to be growing, but reliable statistics are unavailable. Small numbers of non-Christian groups are present, including Jews, Muslims, Rastafarians, and Baha'is.

Voodoo, a traditional religion derived in part from West African beliefs, is practiced alongside Christianity by a large segment of the population. Even though the Government officially recognized Voodoo as a religion in April, Voodoo continues to be frowned upon by elite, conservative Catholics and Protestants. Additionally, the official announcement taken by the Government provided no legal status for Voodoo except for its recognition as a legitimate religious practice.

Many foreign missionaries are affiliated with U.S.-based denominations or individual churches. Others are independent, nondenominational Christian groups. Missionary groups operate hospitals, orphanages, schools, and clinics throughout the country. U.S. churches often send teams to the country on short-term humanitarian

educational or evangelical projects.

Some Protestant and Catholic clergy are active in politics. A Protestant pastor leads a political party, the Christian Movement for a New Haiti (MOCHRENA). Several Catholic priests are among the leadership of the Fanmi Lavalas (FL) party of President Jean Bertrand Aristide, who is himself a former Roman Catholic priest. The Director General of the Office of Religious Affairs, a part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cults, is a Roman Catholic priest. The Conference of Catholic Bishops (CEH) occasionally issues statements on political matters and, along with the Protestant Federation, has been an active participant in the search for a solution to the political impasse between the ruling FL and the opposition. In May 2002, the country's Catholic and Protestant churches organized a "weekend of prayer" to end the political crisis, with other members of society participating. The CEH and the Papal Nuncio increasingly have become active participants in the two-year search for a solution to the political impasse between the ruling FL and the opposition. For example, in June 2002, CEH president Bishop Hubert Constant and the Papal Nuncio arranged and hosted a key meeting between President Aristide and the opposition. Bishop Constant and CEH Vice President, Archbishop Guy Poulard publicly commented on the political crisis and on the responsibilities of the country's politicians.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for the right to practice all religions and faiths, provided that practices do not disturb law and order, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full, and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The 1987 Constitution grants freedom of religion and directs the establishment of laws to regulate the recognition and operation of religious groups. The Ministry of Religious Affairs administers the relevant laws and is responsible for registering churches, clergy, and missionaries. Recognition by the Ministry affords religious groups standing in legal disputes, protects churches' tax-exempt status, and extends civil recognition to church documents such as marriage and baptismal certificates. Registered religious groups are required to submit an annual report of their activities to the Ministry. Although many nondenominational Christian groups and voodoo practitioners have not sought official recognition, there were no reports of any instance in which this requirement has hampered the operation of a religious group. Goods brought into the country for use by churches and missionaries registered with the Department of Revenue are exempted from customs duties, and registered churches are not taxed. Some church organizations have complained that customs officials sometimes refused to honor a church's tax-exempt status; however, it appeared that these refusals generally were attempts by corrupt officials to extort bribes rather than an attempt to limit religious practices.

For many years, Roman Catholicism was the official religion of the country. While its official status ended with the enactment of the 1987 Constitution, neither the Government nor the Holy See has renounced the 1860 Concordat, which continues to serve as the basis for relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the State and the operation of Catholic religious orders in the country. In many respects, Roman Catholicism retains its traditional primacy among the country's religions. Functions with an official or quasi-official character are held in Catholic churches and cathedrals, and certain Catholic holy days are observed officially as national holidays. However, in the past several years, the Government has recognized the growing role of Protestant churches. For example, Protestant clergy are now invited to participate when the churches are asked to play an advisory role in politics.

Foreign missionaries operate freely. They enter on regular tourist visas and submit paperwork similar to that submitted by domestic religious groups in order to register with the Ministry of Religious Affairs. While some missionaries were concerned by the slowness of the Government to issue them residence permits, there was no indication that such delay was due to deliberate harassment on the part of the authorities.

The Constitution stipulates that persons cannot be required to join an organization or receive religious instruction contrary to their convictions. This is accepted to mean, among other things, that in parochial schools run by the Catholic Church or one of the Protestant denominations, the school authorities may not permit proselytization on behalf of the church with which the school is affiliated. Parents have been quick to complain and publicize the isolated instances in which this principle has been violated.

Only 15 percent of the country's schools are public. In some of these, Catholic and other clergy play a role in teaching and administration. This is regulated by local authorities on an ad hoc basis. Church-run schools and hospitals are subject to oversight by the Ministries of Education and Health, respectively.

The Government does not interfere with the operation of radio and other media affiliated with religious groups. In addition to the many radio stations operated by religious (mostly Protestant and evangelical) groups, religious programming is a staple of commercial broadcasting.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally unrestricted practice of religion.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Religion plays a prominent role in society. Many citizens display a keen interest in religious matters, and freely express their personal religious beliefs or affiliation. While society generally is tolerant of the variety of religious practices that flourish in the country, Christian attitudes toward voodoo vary. Many Christians accept voodoo as part of the country's cultural patrimony, but others regard it as incompatible with Christianity, and this has led to isolated instances of conflict in the recent past. Periodic tension between some Protestant and voodoo groups has been managed effectively by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The Ministry maintains offices in the central, northern, and southern areas of the country. Tensions between Protestant and voodoo groups are local in nature and usually involve land disputes and conflicts over proselytizing. In some cases, the Ministry sends representatives to assist local authorities in settling such conflicts. Parties to these local conflicts usually accept the Ministry's mediating role.

Ecumenical organizations exist. Interfaith cooperation is perhaps most effective in the National Federation of Private Schools (FONHEP).

deaths. Women generally are targeted in these cases, which usually are precipitated by the death of a child by unknown causes. Given the prevalence of voodoo in rural areas, it appears likely that voodoo practitioners are targeted in some of these cases.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. Embassy representatives routinely meet with representative religious leaders and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The consular section of the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince maintains contact with many American missionaries and is responsive to their concerns.

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