



OLIRE and IIRF

Joint Submission to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Haiti

For consideration at the 54th session of the UPR Working Group (Jan–Feb 2027)

2026/17

International Institute
for Religious Freedom



International Institute
for Religious Freedom

Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse
Instituto Internacional para la Libertad Religiosa

The International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) was founded in 2007 with the mission to promote religious freedom for all faiths from an academic perspective. The IIRF aspires to be an authoritative voice on religious freedom. We provide reliable and unbiased data on religious freedom—beyond anecdotal evidence—to strengthen academic research on the topic and to inform public policy at all levels. Our research results are disseminated through the *International Journal for Religious Freedom* and other publications. A particular emphasis of the IIRF is to encourage the study of religious freedom in university institutions through its inclusion in educational curricula and by supporting postgraduate students with research projects.

The IIRF has a global presence with academic and advocacy partners on all continents. We perform original research and in collaboration with our partners. The IIRF is also a “meeting place” for all scholars that take an interest in religious freedom.

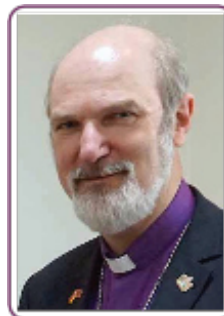
We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all faiths in all spheres of society.



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The **Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America** (OLIRE) founded in 2017, is a program of the Platform Foundation for Social Transformation (FPST). FPST was established in 2010 as a non-profit organization focused on implementing programs that contribute to democracy, human rights (in particular religious freedom), the fight against corruption, protection of the rule of law, etc. OLIRE monitors the state of religious freedom in the region by documenting incidents of religious freedom violations and investigating the structural conditions that undermine religious freedom. Trains individuals and organizations, especially religious minorities. Conducts advocacy efforts through the development of public policy recommendations for the effective protection of religious freedom, especially for religious minorities in different spheres and at all levels.

The **International Institute for Religious Freedom** (IIRF) is one of the oldest think tanks specializing in religious freedom. It was founded in 2005 with a mission to promote religious freedom for all religions from an academic perspective. We provide reliable and unbiased data on religious freedom to strengthen academic research on the topic and inform public policy at all levels. Our research findings are disseminated through the International Journal for Religious Freedom and other publications.

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Introduction

1. As a result of Haiti's third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2022, the country received 221 recommendations. Of the total number of recommendations, the State accepted 205, and 16 were noted.

2. In the third cycle of the UPR, several States issued recommendations addressing the security situation in Haiti, particularly the impact of armed gangs and organized violence on the enjoyment of human rights. In this regard, States recommended strengthening the State's capacity to respond to insecurity and gang-related violence through a combination of domestic measures and international cooperation, including seeking international assistance, reinforcing the National Police, dismantling armed groups, preventing the emergence of new gangs, improving border controls to address trafficking in weapons and ammunition, and ensuring adequate resources for law enforcement, as well as broader measures to reduce violence and improve public safety (Barbados, 131.43; Panamá, 131.78; Djibouti, 131.79; Ukraine, 131.175).

3. Spain also recommended that Haiti strengthen the protection of human rights defenders and journalists working on human rights issues, as well as ensure the effective investigation, prosecution, and reparation of attacks and threats against them, guaranteeing a safe and enabling environment for the exercise of their work (131.132)

4. While the recommendations described above are primarily aimed at addressing the security situation in response to the rise in violence perpetrated by gangs operating in the country, the submitting organizations emphasize that efforts to address violence are inherently linked to the protection of human rights more broadly. In contexts of widespread insecurity and violence, the risk of violations affecting multiple rights increases. Among these rights, particular attention must be given to freedom of religion and beliefs, which is of specific concern to the submitting organizations. Insecurity and violence also affect the full enjoyment and exercise of both the individual and, especially, the collective dimensions of this right, as will be explained in this submission.

International commitments

5. Among some of the international commitments, we can point out:

- i. The government of Haiti has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). It has not accepted the individual communications procedure under the Optional Protocol to the ICCPR, nor the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR.

Constitutional and domestic legislative framework

6. The legal system of Haiti recognizes religious freedom:

- i. Political Constitution of Haiti (1987): Article 30 and Article 30-1 guarantee that all religions and beliefs may be freely exercised. Every person has the right to profess their religion and practice their faith, provided that the exercise of this right does not disturb law and public order. They also

establish that no one may be compelled to belong to a religious organization or to follow religious teachings contrary to their convictions. Article 30-2 further provides that the law shall establish the conditions for the recognition and practice of religions and beliefs.

- ii. On the other hand, on 4 April 2003, a presidential decree issued by Jean-Bertrand Aristide formally recognized Vodou as a religion with its own legal status. Through this instrument, Vodou was acknowledged as a religion possessing legal personality and the right to seek official recognition from the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Likewise, leaders of the faith may be authorized to perform religious ceremonies, including baptisms, marriages, and funerals.

7. Despite the existing legal framework recognizing freedom of religion, the practical implementation of these protections remains insufficient. The widespread violence perpetrated by gangs and the progressive erosion of public institutions have created a context in which insecurity prevails, significantly limiting the State's ability to ensure the protection of the population. This environment has directly impacted religious communities, including those engaged in providing assistance and support to the most vulnerable sectors of society. Attacks against religious leaders, places of worship, and faith-based institutions affect not only individual rights but also the collective and community dimensions of freedom of religion or belief, which are explicitly protected under international law. These impacts further extend to essential social services (such as education, humanitarian assistance, and community support) often delivered by religious organizations in contexts where State presence is limited.

Impact of organized violence on freedom of religion or belief

8. The current challenges to religious freedom in Haiti are closely linked to the country's severe political instability and ongoing security crisis, which intensified following the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021 and the subsequent deterioration of public order.

9. Since at least 2018, criminal gangs and networks have consolidated territorial, economic, and political control across large areas of the country. An estimated 300 armed groups operate nationwide, many organized into coalitions that exercise authority over significant portions of Port-au-Prince and other strategic regions, establishing parallel systems of control and governance. According to the UN Human Rights Office, "at least 5,519 people were killed in Haiti and 2,608 injured between 1 March 2025 and 15 January 2026. Violence perpetrated by gangs has resulted in at least 1,424 people killed and 790 injured; operations against gangs led by security forces have caused at least 3,497 people to be killed and 1,742 injured; and attacks against gangs by self-defence groups have caused at least 598 people to be killed and 76 injured".¹ This has led to mass internal displacement and humanitarian deterioration, which have significantly disrupted community life.²

¹ Situation of human rights in Haiti - Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc6174-situation-human-rights-haiti-report-united-nations-high>

² Report on the displacement situation in Haiti — Round 12 (September 2025). <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/haiti-report-internal-displacement-situation-round-12-december-2025>

10. Religious leaders and institutions across denominations (including Catholic, Protestant, and Vodou communities) have been repeatedly targeted by armed groups through kidnappings, extortion, intimidation, and acts of violence. Clergy and faith leaders are often perceived as high-profile figures vulnerable to ransom demands or as obstacles to criminal dominance within communities.

11. These attacks have resulted in killings, forced displacement of religious personnel and congregations, and the disruption of religious administration, pastoral work, and community life. In several areas, churches, religious schools, and community centers have been looted, vandalized, occupied, or forced to close due to insecurity.

12. Many religious institutions that continue operating face ongoing extortion or so-called “protection payments,” which condition their ability to function safely. Religious houses have been abandoned, and vulnerable members of religious communities, including elderly and sick clergy, have been evacuated due to security threats.

13. In some regions, basic religious activities and communal worship have become dangerous or impossible. Faith leaders have been forced to adapt their ministry by rescheduling services, limiting gatherings, or avoiding travel due to blocked or unsafe roads. Fear of violence has reduced participation in religious life and weakened community cohesion.

14. Insecurity has also significantly affected religious education and youth engagement. Many religious schools and youth centers have been occupied, looted, or destroyed, eliminating safe spaces for education and social development. In this context, the forced recruitment of adolescents into gangs has become increasingly common, further undermining community stability and the protective role of faith-based institutions.

15. Faith-based humanitarian services have been severely disrupted by gang violence and territorial competition. Religious institutions operating schools, hospitals, orphanages, and assistance programs have faced interruptions in services, the displacement or emigration of staff, and growing operational fragility, limiting their capacity to assist vulnerable populations.

16. The emergence of vigilante groups, commonly referred to as Bwa Kale movements, has further complicated the security environment. These groups have carried out acts of extrajudicial violence against suspected gang members, contributing to cycles of retaliation and escalating insecurity. Religious communities have been placed in a difficult position, facing pressure to either support or condemn such actions.

17. Women and girls have been particularly affected by gang violence. Reports indicate that girls associated with or forcibly recruited by gangs are subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse, creating a climate of fear that restricts family, community, and religious participation, especially among young women from religious households.

18. The education system has also been affected, particularly private religious schools, which constitute a significant portion of primary and secondary education in the country. These institutions face security threats, including armed incursions, violence in and around school facilities, and pressure on students and staff, with limited capacity to implement protective measures.

19. The cumulative impact of widespread violence, forced displacement, attacks against religious leaders and institutions, and the disruption of worship and religious services constitutes a de facto restriction on the right to freedom of

religion or belief, as protected under international human rights law, including Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 12 of the American Convention on Human Rights, and Article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantee the freedom to manifest religion individually and collectively, in public or private, through worship, practice, and teaching.

20. In addition, although Vodou has held legal status since its official recognition in 2003, practitioners continue to face persistent social stigma and discrimination, particularly from dominant Christian sectors. Public denunciations portraying Vodou as dangerous or backward have contributed to prejudice, and in some cases, have been linked to acts of violence against Vodou priests and priestesses, including mob attacks and vigilante actions.

21. In the absence of a specific legal framework protecting collective cultural or land rights, Vodou communities lack formal safeguards for their sacred spaces and religious practices. While the Constitution recognizes cultural sites associated with African heritage as part of the national patrimony, limited enforcement and the absence of dedicated protection mechanisms leave Vodou temples and community life vulnerable to marginalization and insufficient institutional support.

22. The UPR framework requires States to assess not only legislative compliance but also the implementation of international human rights obligations in practice. Widespread violence, the erosion of public institutions, and the inability to protect religious communities demonstrate gaps in the State's capacity to fulfill its international obligations.

Recommendations

23. Strengthen efforts to combat gang violence and restore public security and State presence in territories under the control of armed groups, including through the dismantling of gangs, improved controls on the trafficking of weapons and ammunition, and measures to prevent the forced recruitment of children and adolescents, while ensuring civilian oversight and accountability of all security actors, investigating extrajudicial killings committed in anti-gang operations, and preventing the involvement of vigilante movements, such as the so-called Bwa Kale groups, in law enforcement activities.

24. Ensure the protection of freedom of religion or belief in both its individual and collective dimensions, including by adopting protection measures, designed in consultation with the religious communities concerned, for religious leaders, communities, and places of worship of all traditions, including Vodou practitioners facing stigmatization and mob violence, and by promptly investigating, prosecuting, and providing reparation for kidnappings, killings, extortion, and attacks against them.

25. Guarantee the safe and unhindered operation of faith-based schools, hospitals, orphanages, and humanitarian assistance programs, including by protecting their facilities, staff, and beneficiaries, in particular women and girls exposed to sexual violence and exploitation by armed groups, from armed incursions, occupation, looting, and extortion.

26. Request and facilitate the establishment of an international, independent fact-finding mission, with the support of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, mandated to document human rights viola-

tions and abuses committed by gangs, self-defence groups, and security forces, including violations of freedom of religion or belief, and extend a standing invitation to the special procedures of the Human Rights Council, including the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

Imprint

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