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2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Benin

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
July 30, 2012

[Covers calendar year from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011]

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 no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Representatives of the U.S. embassy attended diverse official religious events to showcase values of respect and religious freedom. The public affairs section hosted several events to promote interfaith cooperation and respect.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2002 census (the most recent official population survey), the population is 27 percent Roman Catholic, 24 percent Muslim, 17 percent Voudon (Voodoo), 6 percent other indigenous religious groups, and 5 percent Celestial Christian. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent each include Methodists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Rosicrucians, Baha'is, Baptists, Pentecostals, and those who follow the Unification Church and Eckankar. Seven percent claim no religious affiliation.

Many individuals who identify themselves as Christian or Muslim also practice Voodoo or other traditional religions.

Nearly all Muslims are Sunni. The few Shia Muslims are primarily foreign residents and reside in Benin for commercial reasons.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and provide for a secular state. The constitutional court determines rules on religious matters. In recent

years the court determined that it is illegal to block access of any group to its religious premises and that discussion and debate regarding religious belief is a protected right of free speech.

The Ministry of National Defense was permitted to intervene in conflicts between religious groups to ensure public order and social peace, provided that the intervention complied with the principle of state neutrality in religious affairs.

Persons who wish to form a religious group must register with the Ministry of the Interior. Registration requirements are the same for all religious groups.

Government officials accord respect to prominent leaders of all religious groups by attending induction ceremonies, funerals, and other religious celebrations. Police provide security for any religious event upon request.

In accordance with the constitution, public schools are not authorized to provide religious instruction; however, religious groups are permitted to establish private schools.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Whit Monday, Assumption Day, Eid al-Fitr, All Saints' Day, Tabaski, Christmas, and Traditional Religions Day.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom or any government encouragement of intolerance, and there were no reports that any group was refused permission to register or subjected to unusual delays or obstacles in the registration process. The government respects religious freedom as provided by the constitution. Religious groups were exempt from taxation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Owing to the diversity of religious affiliations typical within families and communities, respect for religious differences was widespread at all levels of society and in all regions. There were reports of occasional conflict between Voodoo practitioners and Christians over Voodoo initiation practices, requiring intervention by police.

Public television featured celebrations of religious holidays and honors given to prominent religious leaders, including ordination anniversaries and funerals. Ecumenical Day is celebrated in the historic town of Ouidah the first Wednesday of May, and traditionally includes a large celebration of interreligious cooperation. Religious leaders work to assure tolerance between Christians and Muslims.

Interfaith dialogue occurred regularly. The country's framework for interfaith dialogue, the "Cadre de Concertation des Confessions Religieuses du Benin," was created in 2007 to advance interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The ambassador participated in diverse religious events at the invitation of the government. The embassy hosted a number of events to promote religious freedom and interfaith dialogue. On November 28, in commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the American cultural center hosted traditional religious leaders at a conference on gender-based violence. On August 16, the embassy's public affairs officer facilitated a discussion with an audience of religious leaders on ways to improve the economic prospects of young people in the country.
