

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Togo

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution specifies the state is secular and protects the rights of all citizens to exercise their religious beliefs, consistent with the nation's laws. All religious groups must register as religious associations with the government and apply for authorization to open places of worship with the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA) in the Ministry of Territorial Affairs (MTA).

In September, the director of the DRA informed religious groups that unregistered denominations are prohibited from opening new worship places and specified separate days of worship for each religion: Sunday for Christians, Friday for Muslims and Saturday for Seventh-day Adventists. He also said wakes and funerals were required to observe an 8:00 p.m. curfew, and muezzin calls to worship were only permitted in large neighborhood mosques. The MTA organized sensitization campaigns and workshops nationwide throughout the year on the legal framework regarding religious leaders. The DRA released a statement in July addressing complaints concerning the high level of volume of worship services and religious observances and announced sanctions would follow if noise levels weren't reduced. Although there was no law or regulation prescribing a permissible volume, the MTA and mayors recommended acceptable decibel levels in their notes to religious leaders.

Members of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim religious groups continued to invite one another to their respective ceremonies.

In March, U.S. embassy officials hosted an iftar discussion on social cohesion and interreligious dialogue with leaders of Muslim, Catholic and Protestant groups.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.7 million (midyear 2023). According to the U.S. government, the population is 42.3 percent Christian, 36.9 percent traditional animist, 14 percent Muslim, and less than 1 percent followers of other religions. Roman Catholics are the largest Christian group, approximately 25 percent of the population, according to the Togolese Conference of Bishops. Protestants include Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, Assemblies of God, and neo-charismatic movements. Other Christian groups include Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Nichiren Buddhists, followers of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Baha'is, and Hindus are among other religious groups in the country. Syncretic Christians include Celestian Church of Christ, Deeper Christian Life Ministry, Apostles Revelation Society, and Church of the Lord (Aladura). Individuals unaffiliated with a religious group constitute less than one percent of the population.

Persons living in the south practice a mixture of different religions. According to the media outlet Savoir News, 52 percent of the population, including Christians, also practice Vodou. Muslims live predominately in the central and upper north regions.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution states the country is a secular state, provides for equality before the law for all citizens regardless of religion, protects all religious beliefs, and prohibits religious discrimination. The constitution also provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship; free exercise of religious belief; and the right of religious groups to organize themselves and carry out their activities consistent with the law, the rights of others, and public order.

The law requires all religious groups, including Indigenous groups, to register as religious associations. Some Christian and Islamic holidays are observed as national holidays. Official recognition as a religious association provides other groups the same rights as those afforded to Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims, including import duty exemptions for humanitarian and development projects. Registration entitles religious groups to receive government benefits such as government-provided teachers for faith-based schools and special assistance in case of natural disasters. Only the MTA can issue authorizations to open new places of worship, and it issues the authorizations only to registered denominations. The law gives mayors and prefects the authority to close illegal places of worship.

Organizations apply for registration with the DRA. A religious group must submit its statutes, statement of doctrine, bylaws, names, and addresses of executive board members, leaders' religious credentials, a site-use agreement, map for religious facilities, and description of its finances. It must also pay a registration fee of 150,000 CFA francs (\$255). Criteria for recognition include authenticity of the religious leader's diploma and the government's assessment of the ethical behavior of the group, which must not cause a breach of public order. The DRA issues a receipt that serves as temporary recognition for religious groups applying for registration. The investigation and issuance of formal written authorization usually takes several years.

By law, religious groups must request permission to conduct large nighttime celebrations, particularly those likely to block city streets or involve loud ceremonies in residential areas. According to the law, local authorities have the right to enforce noise levels and safety rules in places of worship.

The public school curriculum does not include religion classes. The government assigns its own paid employees as additional teachers and staff to many Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic schools; UNESCO estimates 13 percent of religiously affiliated schools receive such assistance. Other registered religious groups have the right to establish schools if they meet accreditation standards.

The constitution prohibits the establishment of political parties based on religion. The law forbids private religious radio stations from broadcasting political material.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

In September, the Director of the DRA, Colonel Bediani Belei informed religious groups that unregistered denominations were prohibited from opening places of worship. According to the DRA, more than 22,000 illegal places of worship operated in the country. Belei also announced days of worship for different faiths: Sunday for Christians, Friday for Muslims and Saturday for Seventh-day Adventists. He also stated loud worship of any kind was strictly forbidden from Monday to Saturday; wakes and funeral prayers must end before 8:00 p.m.; and muezzin calls to worship were only permitted in large neighborhood mosques.

The DRA released a statement in July regarding several thousand complaints concerning the high level of volume of worship services and religious observances and announced sanctions would follow if noise levels were not reduced. Although there was no law or regulation prescribing a permissible volume, the MTA and mayors recommended acceptable decibel levels in their messages to religious leaders.

The DRA stated, “The provisions of the health code, the framework law on the environment and the Togolese penal code are applicable to noise pollution generated by places of worship and engage the civil and penal liability of those responsible for these places.” The announcement prompted mixed reactions on social networks. Some welcomed the regulation against noise pollution, while others complained it was too strict. Associations of religious leaders announced they requested meetings with the DRA to discuss the announcement. After they met, the government’s position remained unchanged by the end of the year.

Throughout the year, the MTA organized sensitization campaigns and workshops nationwide on the legal requirement for religious leaders to request permission from local authorities before conducting large celebrations at night, and the right of local authorities to enforce noise levels and safety rules in places of worship.

The government continued to not act on pending registration applications from religious groups and since 2013, has not accepted new applications. Most pending registration applications were submitted by Christian evangelical religious movements.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders continued to receive complaints from community members about noise from religious observances, leading to government measures to limit worship volume and time.

Members of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim religious groups continued to invite one another to their respective ceremonies. On April 7, Good Friday, the Archbishop of Lome, Nicodeme Barrigah, visited the Muslim Union of Togo (MUT) at the Hadj mosque to share the breaking of the Ramadan fast with Muslims. On June 27, the MUT offered an ox to Barrigah in celebration of Tabaski. Vodou followers continued to practice their religion freely. They organized national and international festivals to revitalize Vodou with the support of administrative and political authorities.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On March 28, embassy officials hosted an iftar discussion on social cohesion and inter-religious dialogue with leaders of Muslim, Catholic and Protestant groups. During the event, religious leaders reaffirmed the necessity to promote continuous interreligious dialogue, tolerance, and peace education in places of worship nationwide. The embassy utilized social media to amplify greetings during religious celebrations.