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Cote d'Ivoire

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, since the 2002 rebellion, the Government has targeted suspected rebels and rebel sympathizers among whom there are many Muslims.

The Government is facing its greatest political crisis since independence following the September 2002 failed coup attempt and mutiny that led to a de facto division of the country. After the onset of the crisis, the Government cracked down on persons perceived to be associated with the rebellion; the crackdown particularly affected persons of northern origins, many of whom were Muslims, and who were presumed to be supporters of the rebellion. In January 2003, all major parties to the crisis signed the Linas-Marcoussis Accord (LMA), which aimed to end the crisis and bring about national reconciliation. This agreement was followed by two others signed in Accra and Pretoria during the period covered by this report, but there was halting progress on LMA implementation. There were fewer reports that security and defense forces harassed Muslims and persons of northern origins because of their alleged activities to endanger the security of the State.

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.

Relations among the various religious groups were at times strained as a consequence of the national crisis; however, strong efforts by religious and civil society groups have helped prevent the political crisis from turning into a religious conflict. There is some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of traditional indigenous religions. The Collective of Civil Society for Peace, created shortly after the failed 2002 coup and containing the main religious and human rights organizations, has visited and sensitized the different ethnic and religious communities throughout the country, including in rebel held zones.

The U.S. Government emphasizes religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Government officials also meet regularly with religious leaders, both individually and as a group, and have engaged them in projects to advance religious tolerance and conciliation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 124,500 square miles, and its population is approximately 18 million. Religious groups in the country include Muslims, Christians, practitioners of traditional indigenous religions, syncretists that practice a mixture of Christian and indigenous religions, and others. Christian churches include the Roman Catholic Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Southern Baptist Church, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The largest Protestant church is the Protestant Methodist Church of Cote d'Ivoire. Evangelical Christian churches are also active. The Shekinah Glory Ministries and the Assemblies of God are evangelical churches.

Syncretistic churches include the Harrist Church (an African Protestant denomination founded in the country in 1913 by a Liberian preacher named William Wade Harris), the Primitive Protestant Church, God's Soldiers (founded by an Ivoirian woman), and the Messianic Church. Bossonism, a traditional religious practice from the Akan ethnic group, is also practiced.

Other religions include Buddhism, the Baha'i Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, the International Association for the Conscience of Krishna, the Limmoudim of Rabbi Jesus (a small Christian group, the origins of which are unknown), and the Movement of Raelis. Many religious groups in the country are associated with U.S. religious groups.

There are foreigners who are practitioners of the Jewish faith and members of the Anglican Church and the Orthodox Church that have good relationships with the aforementioned groups, but who generally do not

join the collectives formed by religious leaders to promote dialogue and harmony.

The most recent national census, conducted in 1998, indicated that among citizens and noncitizen residents, Muslims made up approximately 38.6 percent of the country's resident population; Catholics, 19.4 percent; practitioners of traditional indigenous religions, 11.9 percent; Protestants, 6.6 percent; other Christians, 3.1 percent; practitioners of other religions, 1.7 percent; Harrists, 1.3 percent; and persons without religious preference or affiliation, 16.7 percent. Among citizens only, 27.4 percent were Muslim, 20.8 percent were Catholic, 15.4 percent practiced traditional indigenous religions, 8.2 percent were Protestant, 3.4 percent were of other Christian affiliations, 1.9 percent practiced other religions, 1.6 percent were Harrist, and 20.7 percent were without religious affiliation. Foreigners living in the country were 70.5 percent Muslim and 15.4 percent Catholic, with small percentages practicing other religions.

Most of the country's many syncretistic religions are forms of Christianity that contain some traditional indigenous practices and rituals. Many such religions were founded by local or other African prophets and are organized around, and dependent upon, the founder's personality. Some emphasize faith healing or sacred objects imbued with supernatural powers to bring health and good fortune. Many nominal Christians and Muslims practice some aspects of traditional indigenous religions, especially in difficult times.

Generally, practitioners of traditional religions have followed a trend toward conversion to Christianity and Islam. Recently, there has been an increase in the membership of evangelical churches. Missionary work, urbanization, immigration, and higher education levels have led to a decline in the percentage of practitioners of traditional religions from 37 percent in 1975 to 11.9 percent in 1998.

Muslims are found in the greatest numbers in the northern half of the country, although they also are increasingly numerous in the cities of the south, west, and east due to immigration, migration, and interethnic marriages. In 1998, Muslims composed 45.5 percent of the total urban population and 33.5 percent of the total rural population. Catholics live mostly in the southern, central, and eastern portions of the country, although recently some animists in the north have converted to Catholicism. Practitioners of traditional indigenous religions are concentrated in rural areas of the northern, western, central, and eastern regions. Protestants are concentrated in the central, eastern, and southwest regions. Members of the Harrist Church are concentrated in the south.

Political and religious affiliations tend to follow ethnic lines. The north is associated with Islam, and the south is associated with Christianity and traditional religions. There is also a correlation between religious and political affiliations and social class. For example, most Muslims favor the Rally of Republicans (RDR), and the merchant class is mostly Muslim.

Immigrants from other parts of Africa generally are at least nominally Muslim or Christian. The majority of foreign missionaries are European or U.S. representatives of established religions, although a man based in Japan established a Hare Krishna group during the period covered by this report.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. Although there is no state religion, the Government informally favors Christianity for historical and ethnic reasons.

Beginning with the 2001 Forum for National Reconciliation, the Government initiated several programs aimed at improving relations between the Government and religious groups. However, some Muslims believe that their religious and ethnic affiliation makes them targets of discrimination by the Government with regard to the renewal of national identity cards. Since the power sharing Government of National Reconciliation was put in place in 2003, the perception among some Muslims that the Government discriminates against their community with respect to employment, especially senior government positions, has lessened. For example, Muslims occupy the Prime Ministership, the High Chancellorship, and the National Assembly Presidency. Also, 12 of the 41 Ministers are Muslims.

In past years, the Government paid for the construction of Catholic cathedrals in the business and administrative district of Abidjan. In 1994, the Government directed the construction of the Plateau Mosque in central Abidjan, to be financed with the help of governments or government-affiliated religious organizations of some largely Islamic Arab countries. The project remained unfinished at the end of the period covered by this report. According to a Ministry of Religion official and the Islamic National Council (CNI), there was no significant progress on the mosque construction because funding from Islamic countries decreased due to the instability in the country.

The Government observes major Muslim and Christian religious holidays. The recognized Muslim holy days are Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Layla tul-Qadr, and the Prophet Muhammed's birthday. The recognized

Christian holy days are Christmas, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Whit Monday, and All Saints' Day.

The law requires religious groups to register with the Government. In accordance with the 1960 law governing associations, all religious groups wishing to operate in the country must submit to the Ministry of Territorial Administration a file including the group's bylaws, the names of the founding members, the date of founding (or the date on which the founder received the revelation of his or her calling), general assembly minutes, the names of members of the administrative board, and other information. The Ministry of Territorial Administration consults with the Ministry of Religion and investigates through the Ministry of Security the backgrounds of the founding members to determine that the group has no politically subversive purpose. No religious group has complained of arbitrary registration procedures or problems with gaining government recognition. The Government does not register traditional indigenous religious groups; such groups are not formally organized and none have applied for registration or recognition.

The Government grants no tax or other benefits to religious groups; however, some religious groups have gained some favors after individual negotiations. Examples include reductions in the cost of resident alien registration, customs exemptions on certain religious items, diplomatic passports for major religious chiefs, and, in some cases, privileges similar to those of diplomats. No particular religion is favored consistently in this manner.

Foreign missionaries must meet the same requirements as any foreigner, including registering as resident aliens and obtaining national identification cards. There were no reports that foreign missionaries were denied such registration arbitrarily.

Religious instruction is permitted in public schools and usually is offered after normal class hours. Established Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant groups, including evangelical churches, offer religious instruction. While a government decree that allows only Catholic and Protestant teachings in schools exists, it no longer is enforced. The Government continued to subsidize both Roman Catholic and other Christian schools, although less than in the past because of the prevailing economic crisis. The Government did not subsidize Muslim schools. During the period covered by this report, the Government allotted approximately \$100,000 to 20 major religious associations to assist with various costs and projects; the allocation was based on the number of followers of each association.

During the period covered by this report, the Government took positive steps to promote interfaith understanding. Government officials, including the President and his religious advisers, appear at major religious celebrations and events organized by a wide variety of faiths and groups. The Government often invites leaders of various religious communities, including the Mediation Committee for National Reconciliation, the Forum of Religious Confessions, and the Collective of Religious Confessions for National Reconciliation and Peace to attend official ceremonies and to sit on deliberative and advisory committees. The Government also invited these groups, along with representatives from all sectors of civil society, to give their viewpoints on the Pretoria agreement that was signed in April 2005 between the Government and rebel groups controlling the northern part of the country. The Government does not generally invite traditional indigenous religious groups to the ceremonies or committee meetings. In August 2004, the Minister of Religion traveled to England to participate in the 38th Convention of the Ahmadiya Islamic Community.

During the period covered by this report, some Muslim leaders claimed that many state institutions, particularly the national television and radio stations, were dominated by Christian programming, including broadcasts of the Catholic Mass, choirs, religious services, and Christian music. Specifically, the Islamic National Council and the Muslim community questioned why Catholics had more than 10 radio frequencies, while Muslims had only 1 frequency. However, Muslim leaders appear on state television and have their own weekly television show, although it occupies a less favorable programming slot at a late hour.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government monitors minority religious groups for signs of political activity it considers subversive. There were few reports of government surveillance of religious groups.

In the past, the Government informally favored the Roman Catholic Church, and Catholic Church leaders have had a much stronger voice in government affairs than their Islamic counterparts, which has led to feelings of disenfranchisement among some in the Muslim population. However, President Gbagbo continued to meet with Muslims leaders to discuss their concerns.

Some Muslims believe their religious or ethnic affiliations made them targets of government discrimination with regard to both employment and national identity card renewals. Due to the tense political situation in the country and the ethnic and religious divisions along which political party lines are drawn, some Muslims continue to be scrutinized more closely in the identity card application process. The national identity card issue is contentious as it has not been clear for several years which persons are required to have which card (citizen/noncitizen) and how the cards are to be distributed. As most Ivorian Muslims share names,

style of dress, and customs with several of the country's predominantly Muslim neighboring countries, citizens sometimes are wrongly accused of attempting to obtain nationality cards illegally. Some noncitizens from neighboring, predominantly Muslim countries, accuse the Government of delaying or not processing their naturalization cases. Some persons, particularly northerners and foreigners, complain that security forces have harassed them for having the wrong identity cards or not having an identity card. The LMA calls for the resolution of the national identity question and improved implementation of naturalization laws to ensure that citizenship is granted in an equitable manner to qualified persons. This problem was not resolved during the period covered by this report.

Northern citizens also complained that when applying for passports or national identity cards, they were asked to provide more documents than applicants from southern ethnic groups. There were also reports that police officers confiscated or destroyed identity cards of northern citizens, telling northerners they should apply for a "resident permit" (carte de séjour), which is normally given to foreigners only. In addition, security forces were more likely to extract bribes at checkpoints from northerners and foreigners than from southern citizens.

Muslims often struggled for state benefits that came more easily to practitioners of other religions. For example, Catholic and Protestant schools are regarded as official schools supervised by the Ministry of Education and subsidized by the Government. The Government allows Islamic schools that follow an official curriculum, but it does not subsidize them.

Using state funds budgeted each fiscal year for the President's discretionary use, President Gbagbo authorized payment for 210 Muslims to make the pilgrimage to Mecca in 2005. However, some Muslim organizations continue to view the Government's strict financial and organizational requirements for Hajj pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia as unnecessary and unwarranted interference since churches organize several Christian pilgrimages throughout the year without government supervision. In 2003, the Islamic Umma Front (FOI) and the National Trade Union of Couriers asked the Government to liberalize the Hajj process so that pilgrims could organize the trips without government involvement. A Ministry of Religion official stated the Government must be involved in the organization of Hajj as it involves 3,000 to 4,000 citizens leaving the country each year. Some Muslim organizations feel that the Government tries to garner support by rewarding Muslims they view as loyal by paying for their pilgrimage to Mecca.

Traditional indigenous religions rarely are included in official or unofficial lists of the country's religions. There is no generally accepted system for classifying the country's diverse traditional religious practices, which vary not only by ethnic group but also by region, village, family, gender, and age group. In addition, members of the country's largely Christian or Islamic urban elite, which effectively control the State, generally appeared disinclined to allow traditional indigenous religions the social status accorded to Christianity and Islam. However, at the beginning of important ceremonies, traditional chiefs very often were invited to participate in traditional libation ceremonies aimed at recognizing ancestors. President Gbagbo also meets frequently with traditional chiefs to listen to their concerns.

The Government does not prohibit links to foreign coreligionists, but it informally discourages connections with politically radical fundamentalist movements, such as Islamic groups based in Iran or Libya.

Christian members of the military are offered access to chaplains and Muslim members are allowed time to pray. Since Muslim military members led the 2002 attempted coup, Muslims in the military generally keep a low profile.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There have been no arrests for the 2003 killings of Mamadou Ganame, a Qur'anic instructor in the southeast; Imam Mahmoud Samassi, founder and Imam of the Lycee Technique Mosque in Abidjan; Mohamed Sangare, assistant imam for the Adobo Mosque in Abidjan; and Mory Fanny Cisse, an Islamic preacher. There were no arrests in the February 2004 incident in which someone shot at five imams of the executive committee of the High Council of Imams.

In the rebel-held north and west, the situation for Christian religious groups appeared to have improved. The Bishop of Yopougon reported that to his knowledge, Catholics and other Christians were free to practice as they wished in the rebel-held zones. In April 2005, the Bishop of Korhogo celebrated the first century of the Catholic Church in Korhogo, a town in the zone under control of the New Forces. The ceremony was attended by more than 30 priests and 4 Bishops who went to Korhogo for the occasion. The Papal Nuncio who attended the ceremony congratulated the Ivorian Bishops and the European priests and nuns who remained in the rebel-held zone on their continued work in spite of the war situation.

Unlike in the previous 12-month period, there were no new reports of attacks on churches.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses by terrorist organizations targeted at specific religions during the period covered by this report.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

In November 2004, the Ministry of Religion invited all religious groups to create the Collective of the Religious Confessions for National Reconciliation and Peace. The collective was formed shortly after a seminar sponsored by the U.S. Embassy and is presided over by the Bishop of Yopougon. The Vice President is the President of the Forum of Religious Confessions and leader of the Celestial Christian Church, Blin Jacob Ediemou. The goal of the collective is to bring together the main protagonists of the crisis and renew a dialogue to teach humility, forgiveness, and reconciliation to create a lasting peace.

Since the inception of the religious collective, a steering committee composed of representatives from the religious groups has been meeting regularly. They have met with various officials, including the Prime Minister, the President, and members of the Forces Nouvelles, to re-engage the actors in the peace process. Unlike the Forum, which does not include some religious groups such as the evangelical churches, the collective includes all the religious groups. During January and February 2005, the collective called on all the major political parties and leaders to promote dialogue.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations among the various religious groups became strained after the outbreak of the 2002 national crisis; there is some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of traditional indigenous religions.

Some persons consider all Muslims to be foreigners or fundamentalists and sometimes refer to Muslims as "destabilizing forces." Some political parties and religious representatives have made similar statements in order to use religious divisions to further political interests.

Muslims frequently experienced discrimination because of their presumed support for the presidential candidacy of former Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara, a Muslim, or because of their ethnic origin. Although many northern Muslims supported the presidential candidacy of Ouattara and the RDR opposition party, some Muslims of northern origin have remained loyal to President Gbagbo's FPI party throughout the crisis.

Followers of traditional indigenous religions also are subject to societal discrimination. Some Christians and Muslims refuse to associate with practitioners of traditional indigenous religions. Many Christian or Islamic leaders disparage practitioners of traditional indigenous religions as "pagans" or practitioners of "black magic." Although the purported practice of "black magic" or "witchcraft" is widely feared, traditional indigenous religions discourage such practices.

Many practitioners of traditional indigenous religions are unaware of or do not consider themselves victims of societal discrimination and do not complain about their treatment.

Conflicts between and within religious groups have surfaced occasionally. For more than 15 years, the Celestial Christians have been divided because of a leadership struggle. In June 2003, a clash between rival leaders Blin Jacob Ediemou and Louis Akeble Zagadou over the ownership of a church led to the arrest of six men; they were later released. In September 2003, the Minister of Religion sent a delegation to Nigeria and Benin to consult with Celestial Christian leaders. In an attempt to end the Church's religious dispute, and with the support of the Ministry of Religion, World Celestial Christian leader Pastor Benoit Agbaossi came to Abidjan in April 2005 and inaugurated Blin Jacob Ediemou as the Celestial Christian leader for the country. Zagadou continued to challenge Ediemou's authority.

The Minister of Religion took an active role in settling the 11-year-old leadership conflict within the Messianic Church that started after the death of founder Prophet Meledge Edjro Josue. The Ministry conducted a mission from October 2003 to March 2004 in the southern Leboutou region, interviewing various members and leaders of the church before successfully ending the mediation in August. On August 15, 2004, the two factions agreed to form a joint board of administration to manage the Messianic Church,

thus reconciling the Church members.

Relations between Muslims and Christians, specifically Catholics, improved during the period covered by this report. Religious leaders continued to attend each other's main religious celebrations, setting an example of reconciliation for their respective communities.

Prior to the crisis, there were examples of long-standing interfaith cooperation. The cooperation has resumed to a lesser extent during the period covered by this report. Once a year, on New Year's Eve, members of all Christian religious groups gather in the National Stadium in Abidjan for a nightlong vigil and prayer. When serious social problems arose, simultaneous Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim prayer ceremonies were held in churches, temples, and mosques to ask for divine assistance. Kouassi-Datekro, a town in the Akan region in the eastern part of the country, is famous for ecumenical events involving simultaneous prayer services of all faiths. Religious leaders from diverse groups assembled on their own initiative to mediate in times of political conflict; however, no leaders of traditional indigenous religious groups were included.

The Forum of Religious Confessions endeavors to promote dialogue, increase understanding, and improve the relationships among religious leaders and groups and is headed by the leader of the Celestial Christian Church. The Research Group in Democracy and Social and Economic Development of Cote d'Ivoire (GERDDES-CI) created the forum, which includes leaders of many of the country's religious groups, including Catholics, Muslims, various Protestant groups, several syncretist groups, the Association of Traditional Priests, and the Bossonists, an association of indigenous Akan religious priests. The Ministry of Religion cooperates closely and regularly with the forum.

The GERDDES-CI also helped create the Collective of Civil Society for Peace (CCSP), which has worked since the beginning of the 2002 crisis to promote national reconciliation. Some observers believe that the CCSP's work helped prevent the national crisis from turning into a religious war.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government emphasizes religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Since the onset of the crisis, the U.S. Embassy has assisted efforts by the Government and nongovernmental organizations to mitigate religious tensions in the country. The U.S. Ambassador and other U.S. Government officials regularly meet with religious leaders. In February 2005, in cooperation with the Embassy, the Collective of Religious Confessions for National Reconciliation and Peace organized a round table of the religious groups that the political leaders of the major political parties attended. An imam and a priest were the main lecturers.

On December 1, 2004, the Ambassador hosted a meeting for religious leaders. After the meeting, at the invitation of the Minister of Religion and with the strong support of the Ambassador, the religious groups met to form the Collective of Religious Confessions for National Reconciliation and Peace. On February 21, 2005, the Embassy and the U.N. Development Program organized a roundtable entitled "My Share of the Sacrifice for Peace and Reconciliation in Cote d'Ivoire." More than 100 religious and political leaders, journalists, and members of civil society attended. The Ambassador served as moderator, and speakers included imams, pastors, and a professor of theology. The roundtable provided a forum for interfaith dialogue and a constructive debate on the specific contribution that religious leaders could make to solve the political crisis in the country.

The Embassy also hosted an Iftar for Islamic leaders, at which the Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed with the guests how religious leaders could help resolve the conflict. During the period covered by this report, the Embassy presented a speaking program entitled "U.S. Society and Political Process: A Project for Emerging Muslim Leaders." Embassy officials also met with the CNI, the Forum of Religious Confessions, and the Collective of Religious Confessions for National Reconciliation and Peace. The Forum of Religious Confessions was started before the crisis with the help of Embassy funds, and the Embassy continued to support its activities.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51465.htm)