



2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Benin

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Executive Summary

The constitution provides for state secularism and freedom of religious thought, expression, and practice. All religious groups must register with the government. The government provided 500 million CFA francs (\$928,000) to support major religious groups.

Religious tolerance was widespread among all levels of society, but there were minor religious-based conflicts in communities which prompted government intervention for resolution. Religious leaders promoted interfaith dialogue.

The U.S. embassy met with government officials to identify ways of supporting the latter's interfaith dialogue and education initiatives and hosted an inter-religious dialogue with prominent members from Muslim, Christian, and Voodoo communities to discuss the role of religion in advancing peace.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.1 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the 2002 census (the most recent official survey; results from the 2013 census have not yet been officially released), the population is 27 percent Roman Catholic, 24 percent Muslim, 17 percent Voodoo, 6 percent other indigenous religious groups, and 5 percent Celestial Christian. Groups constituting less than 5 percent each include Methodists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahais, Baptists, Pentecostals, the Unification Church, and Eckankar. Seven percent state no religious affiliation.

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

Most Muslims are Sunni and are concentrated in northern areas. The few Shia are primarily foreign residents. Southern areas are more heavily Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes Benin as a secular state, prohibits religious discrimination under the law, and provides for the right of religious thought, expression, and practice, consistent with public order as established by law and regulations.

The Ministry of Defense through its gendarmes, generally in rural areas, and the Ministry of Interior through the police, generally in cities, have the authority to intervene in conflicts between religious groups to ensure public order and social peace, provided that intervention complies with the principle of state neutrality in religious affairs.

Persons who wish to form a religious group must register with the Ministry of Interior. Registration requirements include submission by applicants of administrative materials (including a birth certificate, police record, request letter, copy of identification, and the group's internal rules) and payment of a registration fee of 50,000 CFA francs (\$93).

By law public schools may not provide religious instruction. Religious groups may establish private schools.

Government Practices

The government, through the Cadre de Concertation des Confession Religieuses (Consultation Framework for Religious Groups), provided yearly financial support of approximately 500 million CFA francs (\$928,000), distributed among the principal religious groups (Christians, Muslims, and traditional religions). There was discussion among religious groups within the *cadre* on what constituted an equitable distribution of the funds.

On September 9, ministers and other high-ranking officials met in Cotonou to discuss implementation of a government-sponsored project to promote interfaith exchanges among diverse communities nationwide.

Government officials attended inductions, funerals, and other religious ceremonies. State-owned television often broadcast these events. Police provided security for any religious event upon request.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Respect for religious diversity and differing affiliations was widespread at all levels of society and in all regions, including within families and communities. There were reports, however, of occasional conflict requiring police intervention between Voodoo practitioners and Christians. In general these were peacefully resolved with assistance from government officials and local authorities.

A conflict arose in Baname, in central Benin, among members of the Catholic Church, Voodoo officials, and leaders of the newly created Church of Baname. Voodoo followers in that region complained that leaders of the Church of Baname made public statements denigrating Voodoo practices. The Catholic Church stated the Church of Baname engaged in non-authorized use of symbols and vestments belonging to the Catholic Church. Senior government officials traveled to Baname on January 30, and on January 31, the Council of Ministers (cabinet-equivalent) published a statement underscoring the constitutionally-based right of citizens to religious freedom and urging the Church of Baname and the Catholic Church to peacefully resolve their differences. The parties did so.

On May 3, Muslim, Christian, and traditional religious leaders attended a launch ceremony for a book written by a prominent imam of the central mosque of Cotonou on interfaith dialogue and

Islam. Religious leaders participating in the event delivered messages in support of religious tolerance in the country.

Interfaith dialogue occurred regularly. The National Framework for Interfaith Dialogue, which included the major religious groups, held quarterly sessions to advance interfaith cooperation.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with the former mediator of the republic to learn more about government-sponsored initiatives to promote interfaith education and dialogue in schools and identify embassy-sponsored engagement activities to support these initiatives.

The embassy supported activities proposed by local religious figures and public servants who sought to promote religious freedom and tolerance. On July 30, the embassy hosted a panel discussion on the theme of religion and peace to discuss the role religion plays in fostering peace. The panel consisted of an imam, a Catholic priest, an evangelical pastor, and a Voodoo priestess. The event was open to the public and broadcast live to youth at an embassy facility in the city of Parakou.

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