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U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Cote D'Ivoire

Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
Washington, DC, September 9, 1999

COTE D'IVOIRE

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. There are no known impediments to religious expression. There is no state religion; however, for historical as well as ethnic reasons, the Government informally favors Christianity, in particular the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic Church leaders are often the first on whom high government officials call for advice and mediation in times of social or political discord. Members of the Catholic clergy take part in political debate, whereas Islamic leaders may be criticized by government figures and official press organs if they engage in political debate. On December 31, 1998, government and opposition leaders gathered to greet and congratulate Archbishop of Abidjan Bernard Agre in his cathedral; no similar gathering to honor an imam is known to have occurred.

In 1987-90, then-President Felix Houphuet-Boigny sponsored the construction in his hometown, Yamoussoukro, of the world's largest Catholic church, the "Our Lady of Peace" Basilica, which was modeled on St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and consecrated by the Pope. Although the basilica's construction was financed ostensibly by private funds, allegations persist that funds of the National Cocoa and Coffee Board, a state-owned export monopoly, were diverted for this purpose. The Government also paid for the construction of the Catholic cathedral in Abidjan, which was completed in 1985; part of the cost of building it also was paid by contributions that the Government required of all salaried workers in the country, regardless of their religious affiliation. More recently, the Government also has begun sponsoring or financing the construction of shrines for groups other than the Catholic Church. It currently is directing the construction of the Plateau Mosque in central Abidjan and financing it with the help of governments or government-affiliated religious organizations of some largely Islamic Arab countries. A high government official has indicated that the Government plans soon to sponsor the construction of a temple for all of the country's Protestant denominations.

The Government establishes requirements for religious groups under a 1939 French law. All religious groups wishing to operate in the country must submit to the Ministry of the Interior a file including the group's by-laws, the names of the founding members, the date of founding (or date on which the founder received the revelation of his or her calling), the minutes of the general assembly, the names of members of the administrative board, and other information. The Interior Ministry investigates the backgrounds of the founding members to ascertain that the group has no politically subversive purpose. However, in practice, the Government's regulation of religious groups generally has not been unduly restrictive since 1990, when the Government legalized opposition political parties.

Although nontraditional religious groups, like all public secular associations, are required to register with the Government, no penalties are imposed on a group that fails to register. In practice, registration can bring advantages of public recognition, invitation to official ceremonies and events, publicity, gifts, and school subsidies. No religious group has ever complained of arbitrary registration procedures or recognition. The Government does not register traditional indigenous religious groups.

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, and in some cases privileges similar to those of diplomats. No particular religion is favored consistently in this manner. Occasionally, a state-owned company grants favors to religious leaders, such as a reduction in airplane fare.

The published results of the most recent national census, conducted in 1988, indicate that Muslims made up about 25.1 percent of the country's citizens; Catholics made up 22.7 percent; Protestants, 6.6 percent; Harrists, 1.9 percent; practitioners of traditional indigenous religions, 22.8 percent; practitioners of other religions, 4.0 percent; and persons without religious preference or affiliation, 16.9 percent. However, because the country has a large population of noncitizens, many of whom are Muslims, Muslims make up substantially more than 25 percent of the country's total population.

Muslims are found in greatest numbers in the northern half of the country, although due to immigration they also are becoming increasingly numerous in the cities of the south. In 1988 Muslims constituted 47.2 percent of the total urban population (citizens and noncitizens) and 33.2 percent of the total rural population. Catholics are found mostly in the southern, central, and eastern portions of the country. Practitioners of traditional indigenous religions are concentrated in rural areas of the north, west, center, and east. Protestants are concentrated in the central, eastern, and southwest regions. Members of the Harrist Church, an African Protestant denomination founded in the country in 1913 by a Liberian preacher named William Wade Harris, are concentrated in the south.

Both political and religious affiliation tends to follow ethnic lines. As population growth and movement have accentuated ethnic distinctions between the groups of the Sahel and those of the forest zone, those distinctions have been sometimes expressed in terms of religion (e.g., northern Muslims vs. southern Christians and traditionalists).

Religious groups in the country include the Adventist Church, the Assemblies of God, the Southern Baptist Church, Bossonism (the traditional religious practices of the Akan ethnic group), the Autonomous Church of Celestial Christianity of Osohofia, Islam, Roman Catholicism, the Union of the Evangelical Church of Services and Works of Cote d'Ivoire, the Harrist Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, the Protestant Methodist Church of Cote d'Ivoire, the Yoruba First Church, the Church of God International Missions, the Baptist Church Missions, the Church of the Prophet Papa Nouveau (a syncretistic religion founded in the country in 1937, which combines Christian doctrine, traditional African rituals, and practical concern for social, political, and economic progress for Africans), the Pentecostal Church of Cote d'Ivoire, the Messianic Church, the Limoudim of Rabbi Jesus (a small Christian group, the origins of which are not known), the Unification Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Interdenominational Church. Many religious groups in the country are associated with American religious groups.

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

Traditional indigenous religions, which are not registered officially as religions, are rarely included in official or unofficial lists of the country's religions. There is no generally accepted system of classifying the country's diverse traditional religious practices, which vary not only by ethnic group, but also by region, village, and family, as well as by gender and age group. In addition, members of the country's largely Christianized or Islamicized urban elites, which effectively control the State, generally seem disinclined to accord to traditional indigenous religions the social status accorded to Christianity and Islam. No traditional indigenous religious leader (except for traditional rulers, who also may perform some traditional religious functions) is known ever to have been invited to present New Year's greetings to the President or to take part in a government advisory council.

Immigrants from other parts of Africa are generally at least nominally Muslim or Christian. The majority of foreign missionaries are European or American representatives of established religions, but some Nigerians and Congolese have set up churches. Foreign missionaries must meet the same requirements as any foreigner, including resident alien registration and identification card requirements.

The Government monitors minority religions, to the extent of registering them, but does not control them closely. However, some citizens are alarmed by the explosive proliferation of new groups. In his 1999 New Year's greetings, President Henri Konan Bedie advised the public to be wary of new groups that are not clearly identified and warned such groups against taking advantage of the country's tradition of tolerance to commit acts of fraud or manipulation. In general, the Government closely watches some religious groups, including Islamic associations and minority groups, for signs of subversive political activity but does not otherwise monitor them.

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

Until recently, Catholic priests tended to be better educated than leaders of other religions. Numerous Catholic schools were founded in the country in the early 1900's, during French colonial rule, and citizens who attended these schools generally received good educations and came to make up a disproportionately large part of the country's elites. Many senior government officials, including both heads of state since independence, have been Catholics.

The Baoule ethnic minority, which has dominated the State and the ruling Democratic Party of Cote d'Ivoire (PDCI) since independence, is largely Catholic, although some Baoules continue to practice traditional indigenous religion and a few practice Islam.

The Government has taken steps to improve the situation of Muslims. However, Muslims often have had to struggle for state benefits that came more easily to practitioners of other religions. For exam-

ple, Catholic and Protestant schools are regarded as official schools, supervised by the Ministry of Education and subsidized by the Government. However, until 1994 Islamic schools were regarded as religious schools, were supervised by the Ministry of the Interior, and were unsubsidized even if they followed official school curriculums. Since 1994 Islamic schools that follow official curriculums have been subsidized by the Government. The Government recognized no Muslim religious holidays until 1974 and did not recognize all major Muslim religious holidays until 1994. Churches have always organized Christian pilgrimages without formal government supervision, but until 1993 the Ministry of the Interior supervised Islamic pilgrimages to Mecca (the Hajj).

During 1991 the Catholic Church began to operate community radio stations, first in Man and later in Abidjan and Yamoussoukro, but Muslim efforts to gain authorization to operate similar stations were unsuccessful until 1999, and Muslim organizations, unlike the Catholic church, did not venture to operate unlicensed radio stations. Catholic and Protestant radio stations were given formal approval on March 30, 1999, after operating for months without official permission, and the Government granted authorization for an Islamic radio station on April 21, 1999.

The Government has taken positive steps to promote interfaith understanding. Catholics, Muslims, and Protestants have had their own religious programs on national television and radio for over 20 years. On significant Christian and Islamic holy days, national television often broadcasts films on the life of the founders of those religions. Government officials, including the President and his religious advisers, make a point of appearing at major religious celebrations and events organized by a wide variety of faiths and groups. There is no government-sponsored forum for interfaith dialog, but the Government often invites leaders of various religious communities (but not of traditional indigenous religious groups) to attend official ceremonies and to sit on deliberative and advisory committees.

Religious instruction is permitted in public schools and usually offered after normal class hours. Most such instruction is offered by established Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant groups.

Under the constitution and laws, no civil, political, economic, military, or other secular advantage or disadvantage is conferred by membership in any religious group. However, some Muslims feel that their religious or ethnic affiliation makes them targets of official or unofficial discrimination with regard to employment and renewal of national identity cards. For example, in 1994 Islamic religious leaders demanded that the police stop checking identity cards outside mosques. They asked the Government if police would check cards in similar fashion outside the Catholic cathedral. The Government then instructed the police to cease this practice, and the police complied.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.