

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Côte d'Ivoire

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and worship, consistent with law and order, and prohibits religious discrimination. It emphasizes that religious tolerance is fundamental to the nation's unity, peace, reconciliation, and social cohesion and forbids speech that encourages religious hatred.

Local law enforcement and subnational government leaders continued to partner with religious groups on security matters to prevent violent extremism and protect their communities, especially in northern border areas, from what they stated was a continuing terrorist threat from the Sahel. While secularism is embedded in national law, one religious leader said the state had sometimes preferred certain religions over others in the allocation of government financial support. The government accredited 271 Islamic schools, bringing the total number of students in these accredited schools to 158,000. The government continued to fund Christian religious pilgrimages as well as pilgrimages for Muslims to Saudi Arabia.

There were two reported incidents of conflicts between local Muslim communities and Christians. In Anyama Commune, the predominantly Muslim community tried to block the construction of an evangelical church despite the church's claim to the land. The case remained pending before a court at year's end. In Bassawa, the local Muslim community barricaded the village's Christian church, forcing it to close for more than a month until Christian leaders and local authorities successfully met with members of the Muslim community. A Christian leader said an imam used inflammatory speech against Jews and Christians on social media in the wake of the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack in Israel. Another Christian leader said the government deported a pastor from Sierra Leone after the leader alerted authorities to the pastor's "extremist" preaching. Some Muslim leaders stated they continued to prevent the influence of what they called intolerant forms of Islam, by providing imams with suggested themes for sermons, advising imams to closely vet guest preachers, and requiring traveling Muslim preachers to obtain advance approval of their sermons from local Muslim authorities. Several Christian denominations also monitored hate speech and provided antiextremist training. The Alliance of Religions for Peace in Cote d'Ivoire met with civil society and government officials before the September elections to urge calm, respect for the results, and fair media coverage.

U.S. embassy representatives continued to meet with government officials to discuss the state of religious freedom and tolerance in the country. They raised topics including interreligious conflicts, threats violence, or harassment that targeted specific religious groups and the government's assessment of the threat of religiously motivated violent extremism in the country. The Ambassador met individually with leaders of the Supreme Council of Imams, Mosques and Islamic Affairs of Cote d'Ivoire (COSIM), the Catholic Archbishop of Abidjan, and the president of the Federation of Evangelical Churches of Cote d'Ivoire to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. The Ambassador and other embassy representatives also regularly met with other religious leaders to discuss religious groups' relations with the government and each other and the role of religious leaders in promoting peace and reconciliation.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 29.3 million (mid-year 2023). According to the 2021 census, the country has a total population of 29.4 million, of which 42.5 percent are Muslim, 39.8 percent Christian, and 12.6 percent identify as not following a religion. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Animists, Buddhists, Baha'is, Rastafarians, followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jews, and Bossonists (who follow traditions of the Akan ethnic group).

Muslim groups include Sunnis (95 percent of Muslims), many of whom are Sufi; Shia (mostly members of the Lebanese community); and Ahmadis. Among Christians, Roman Catholics account for 17 percent; Methodists 2.3 percent; Harrists (a group that follows the teachings of William Wade Harris, a Liberian who evangelized in the country in the early 20th century) 0.5 percent; and other Christians, including evangelicals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Southern Baptists, Greek Orthodox, Copts, members of the Celestial Church of Christ, and members of the Assemblies of God, 20 percent combined. Many individuals who identify as Christian or Muslim also practice some aspects of Indigenous religious beliefs. Muslims constitute a majority in the north of the country and Christians in the south. Members of both groups, as well as other religious groups, reside throughout the country.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution stipulates a secular state that respects all beliefs and treats all individuals equally under the law, regardless of religion. It specifically prohibits religious discrimination in public and private employment and provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, and worship consistent with the law, the rights of others, national security, and public order. It recognizes the right of religious communities to provide for the education of children under conditions determined by law. It prohibits "propaganda" that encourages religious hatred. It recognizes the right of political asylum in the country for individuals persecuted for religious reasons.

The Department of Faith-Based Organizations (DGC), part of the Ministry of Interior and Security, is charged with promoting dialogue among religious groups as well as between the government and religious groups, providing administrative support to religious groups attempting to become established in the country, monitoring religious activities, and managing state-sponsored religious pilgrimages and registration of new religious groups.

The law requires all religious groups, whether local or foreign, to notify the government of their existence and to register with the DGC. To register, a group must provide its bylaws, names of the founding members and board members, date of founding, and general assembly minutes to the DGC. The DGC investigates the group to ensure it has no members or purpose deemed politically subversive and that no members have been judicially deprived of their civil and political rights. Local religious groups are allowed to operate for two months without official approval after they submit their registration application.

Foreign religious groups with a presence in the country also require authorization from the Minister of Interior and Security. Whether a religious group is categorized as local or foreign is based on the nationality of its members, the source of its funding, the make-up of its executive board, and the location of its head office. Groups with 75 percent foreign membership, foreign funding, foreign board members, or a foreign head office are considered foreign. Foreign religious groups are technically not allowed to begin operating until they receive authorization, but this is not enforced.

There are no penalties prescribed for local or foreign religious groups that do not register, but registered groups benefit from government support, such as free access to state-run television and radio for religious programming if requested. Registered religious groups are not charged import duties on devotional items, such as religious books or rosaries. Registered religious groups are also exempt from property tax on the places of worship they own. Nonregistered groups are not allowed to sue for damages or receive compensation for injuries suffered, but members of these groups may do so as individuals.

There are legal penalties for threatening, via an “information system,” violence or death. “Information system” includes print and electronic media. When such a threat is of a “racist, xenophobic, religious, or ethnic [nature] or refers to a group characterized by race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin,” the law provides for a prison term of 10 to 20 years and a fine of 20 million to 40 million CFA francs (\$34,000 to \$68,000). In addition, defamation, insults, or threats made towards a group of people who belong to a certain race, ethnicity, or religion are punishable by a prison term of five to 10 years and a fine of 500,000 to five million CFA francs (\$850 to \$8,500).

Religious education is not included in the public-school curriculum but is often included in private schools affiliated with a particular faith. Religious groups running those schools normally provide opt-out procedures. Religiously affiliated schools must implement the national curriculum, and their teachers and supervisory staff must participate in training offered by the Ministry of National Education and Literacy before the school receives accreditation from the ministry. The government provides some funding to accredited private primary schools, both secular and religious, pursuant to legal conventions between the government and these schools. Subsidies are paid on a per-student basis, and the rate per student is the same for secular and religious schools.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

During the year, according to the government and international nongovernmental organizations such as the International Crisis Group (ICG), there were no reports of terrorist attacks in the country, although there were occasional reports of skirmishes between unidentified armed groups and security forces. Government and civil society sources and the ICG, however, expressed concern that violent extremist groups operating in the Sahel could increase their presence in the country and recruit from vulnerable populations, such as unemployed youth and refugees from neighboring countries. To counter this threat, local law enforcement and subnational government leadership continued to partner with religious leaders on security matters to prevent violent extremism and protect their communities, especially in northern border areas, from what they stated was the continuing potential for terrorism. This cooperation included information sharing, monitoring of social media and other communication channels, and supporting efforts to foster youth employment and engagement in society. According to a report by the ICG in August, President Allassane Dramane Ouattara, a Muslim married to a Catholic woman with Jewish origins, made religious tolerance a government priority because of its importance to social stability.

Leaders of Christian denominations said they had generally positive working relationships with the government, but the leader of one Christian denomination again stated that, while secularism is embedded in national law, he had witnessed several cases where the state gave preferential treatment to certain religions. For example, according to this leader, the allocation of government funds to Christian groups was often much smaller, sometimes only 10 percent, of the allocation to Muslim groups. He also said that the allocation for his group had decreased year over year while the allocation for Muslim groups increased; official government data on funding to religious groups, however was not available.

During the year, the Ministry of National Education accredited 271 Islamic schools, bringing the number of students in such accredited schools up to 158,000, compared to 137,000 in 2022. Islamic schools, unlike the majority of Christian schools, historically operated without formal accreditation

from the ministry. Islamic school education typically ends when a child turns 16 years old, the compulsory minimum stay-in-school age for the country's students.

The DGC reported the government funded pilgrimages for 2,058 Christians to locations in Portugal, Spain, Israel, Turkey, and France during the year. The government also provided funding to more than 3,000 Christians who completed pilgrimages to holy places within the country. For Muslims, the government estimated the total cost for each pilgrim to travel to Mecca was \$7,000; the government funded approximately 50 percent of the travel costs for more than 10,000 pilgrims making the Hajj.

The DGC did not provide the number of religious groups that it registered during the year. The DGC stated that its biggest challenge with religious groups was that many did not respect local noise restriction rules and the approved hours for religious gatherings. Loud ceremonies generated complaints from neighbors, especially in urban areas, and required government intervention on some occasions to forcibly stop ceremonies after approved hours. The complaints generally involved Christian churches that held multi-day prayers and continued to emit amplified sound throughout the night during the 10:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. restricted hours for noise pollution.

In October, the DGC reported that the government was planning to update the law defining and governing religious groups. A new law was drafted but was not available for public review. The DGC said the new law would update the definitions of religious groups to better differentiate them from civil society groups; the original legislation, which dated to 1960 when the country gained independence, blurred that distinction. The new law, according to the DGC, would draw a clearer distinction between the two types of entities and allow for different regulatory approaches for each.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of local Muslim-Christian conflict during the year. In one instance, the DGC reported that residents in the predominantly Muslim community of Anyama Commune, near Abidjan, tried to block the construction of an evangelical church in the area, despite the church's claim to the land. The case was pending at the end of the year in the Court of Anyama Commune.

In another instance, leaders of a Christian denomination reported that the local Muslim community in Bassawa, a village in the north of the country, barricaded the village's Christian church and declared Bassawa a "Muslim village" in June. The church closed for more than a month while Christian leaders worked with local authorities and community leaders to enforce the national laws protecting religious freedom. The church reopened in August when the Muslim community relented after meeting with Christian leaders and local authorities. The Christian leaders said they persuaded the Muslim community to respect religious freedom and allow others to practice their own beliefs by asking, for example, if Muslims would find it fair to name a village a "Christian village" and bar Muslims from practicing their religion there.

Government sources and civil society leaders said that religiously based hate speech sometimes appeared on social media. A Christian leader said an imam in Abidjan used inflammatory speech on social media against Jews and Christians in the wake of the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack in Israel and the Israeli's military response, but this was the only such case reported. Another Christian leader said a visiting imam from Sierra Leone, whom he described as "radical," preached an "extremist" form of Islam in Bouake, the country's second largest city and home to a large Malian Muslim diaspora community. The Christian leader said the imam called for killing infidels and implementing sharia. He alerted local authorities, who arrested the imam in Bouake and deported him to Sierra Leone. Several Muslim and Christian religious leaders stated there continued to be a gradual increase in extremism and hate speech among their followers, particularly in rural areas and on social media, but they did not provide specific examples.

The Alliance of Religions for Peace in Cote d'Ivoire, composed of religious leaders representing the Catholic, evangelical, and Muslim communities, met with civil society and government authorities, including at the Ministry of Interior and Security, to urge restraint from the security forces, fair reporting from the media in the municipal, regional, and senatorial elections in September, and acceptance of the results by the candidates. After the elections, Alliance members praised the generally peaceful outcome and said the Alliance had played an important role in encouraging peace and stability.

The National Platform for Interfaith Dialogue for the Fight against Violent Extremism, comprised of imams, Catholic priests, evangelical pastors, and youth and women from various religious denominations, worked to prevent intercommunal, political, and electoral violence in northern communities through its 15 local branches. In July, the platform partnered with the National Democratic Institute to host an interfaith conference to share best practices in combating violent extremism through interreligious cooperation. The platform held regular focus group and intercommunal listening sessions to mediate conflict and provide open channels of communication across faith groups.

The president of COSIM, Cheickul Aima Ousmane Diakite, the Catholic Archbishop of Abidjan, Cardinal Jean-Pierre Kutwa, and the president of the Federation of Evangelical Churches of Cote d'Ivoire, Seri Boagnon Apollinaire, continued their messaging that religious freedom and tolerance was the cultural norm in the country. Christian and Muslim leaders in the northern part of the country again reported generally good relations as they worked together to promote religious tolerance and respect for religious diversity.

Some Muslim leaders continued to state that their community took steps to prevent the influence of what they called intolerant forms of Islam in the country. Specifically, they referred to adherents who disparaged any who did not follow their specific interpretation of Islam. These steps included providing imams with suggested themes for sermons and advising imams to closely vet guest preachers before allowing them to give sermons in their mosques. Community leaders in the north of the country reported that some communities required traveling Muslim preachers to have their proposed sermons approved by local Muslim authorities before giving them in village mosques. Muslim leaders in the north continued to report that, as in previous years and contrary to earlier tradition, some imams no longer offered temporary shelter in mosques to male travelers not known to their communities out of fear these travelers might have ties to terrorist or criminal groups. COSIM said it organized a preaching caravan in Ouangolodougou Prefecture in the north in October to educate the population about the risks of extremism. COSIM leaders said they travelled by car in the caravan to preach to local mosques on the importance of religious tolerance. They said this was intended to be a bulwark against the threat of extremism emanating from north of the country's border.

Christian groups also continued their efforts to combat extremism. For example, the Federation of Evangelical Churches of Cote d'Ivoire maintained an internal monitoring group against extremism that covered the federation's 52 administrative regions. According to its representative, the monitoring group's operations and frequent anti-extremist training missions continued to consume approximately one-third of the federation's operating budget. In addition, the Catholic Church, through its Justice and Peace Committee, worked with local communities to improve interfaith relations and the understanding of the rule of law. The Justice and Peace Committee organized an event in which Christians cleaned a mosque in Anono (an Abidjan neighborhood) and prepared food for Muslims during Ramadan in April. The Muslim community reciprocated at a Christian church on Easter.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials continued to engage government officials on the state of religious freedom and tolerance in the country. Specifically, embassy officials met with the DGC and discussed, among other topics, whether the government had noted interreligious conflicts or any threats, violence, or harassment that targeted specific religious groups; whether the government had penalized or denied benefits to any religious groups; and the government's assessment of the threat of religiously motivated violent extremism in the country.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador and other embassy officials met with senior Christian and Muslim religious leaders across the country. The Ambassador met separately with leaders of COSIM, including its president, Cheickul Aima Diakite; members of the Catholic Church; the Ivoirian Jewish community, including Rabbi Yerachmiel Bensaid; and the Federation of Evangelical Churches to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country and identify opportunities for shared messaging on priority areas like security and social cohesion. Throughout the year, embassy representatives continued to meet with representatives from the Muslim, Catholic, evangelical Christian, Methodist, and Jewish communities. This included attending a Hannukah celebration in December. They discussed these religious groups' relations with the government, the role of religious leaders in promoting peace and reconciliation, relations among different religious groups, and the status of religious freedom and tolerance in the country.

In April, the Ambassador hosted an iftar at her residence. Representatives from many of the country's religious groups attended, including Muslim, Catholic, evangelical Christian, Methodist, Baptist, Jewish, and Baha'i groups and the Church of Jesus Christ. The conversation focused on social cohesion, reinforcing religious freedom, and opportunities to combat extremism and misinformation. During religious holidays, embassy staff also delivered dried food and other goods for distribution to vulnerable members of different churches.

The embassy continued to fund The National Platform for Interfaith Dialogue for the Fight Against Violent Extremism. The embassy also funded Al Bayane Television and Radio's Mission Salaam Program, which aimed to spread a message of peace via Muslim media networks translated into local languages throughout the country and in border regions with Burkina Faso and Mali. Embassy leadership participated in press interviews with Mission Salaam to highlight the importance of countering violent extremism and accepting all religious faiths.

The embassy used social media to share greetings on religious holidays and highlight the Ambassador's meetings with religious leaders.