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2015 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. Religious groups other than Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims must register with the government in a procedure that includes providing the religious credentials of leadership, financial information, and plans for religious facilities and satisfying the government's ethical criteria. Many religious groups applied for registration, but by year's end a large number of these applications had not been approved. In September the government presented the cabinet with a new regulation on worship practices, including means of addressing disputes between religious groups, on which it had solicited input on the legislation from representatives of 11 religious federations.

Disputes among religious groups were frequently related to noise caused by religious celebrations, or competition for parishioners between churches. Members of different religious groups frequently attended each other's ceremonies, and interfaith marriage was common.

The U.S. embassy met with the Ministry of Territorial Administration (MTA) during the year to discuss religious freedom, and also regularly met with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.5 million (July 2015 estimate). According to a 2004 estimate by the University of Lome, the most recent data available, the population is 33 percent traditional animist, 28 percent Roman Catholic, 14 percent Sunni Muslim, 10 percent Protestant, and 10 percent other Christian denominations. The remaining 5 percent includes persons not affiliated with any religious group. Protestant groups include Methodists and Lutherans. Many Christians and Muslims also engage in indigenous religious practices. Reliable figures are difficult to obtain due to migration and because the government does not collect religious and ethnic data.

Most Muslims live in the central and northern regions. Christians live mainly in the southern part of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states the nation is a secular state and ensures equality before the law of all citizens, regardless of religion, respects all religious beliefs, and prohibits religious discrimination. It provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship, the 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 recognizes Catholicism, Protestantism (including Methodism and Lutheranism, the largest Protestant groups), and Islam as state religions. It requires all other religious groups, including indigenous groups, to register as religious associations. Official recognition as a religious association affords these groups the same rights as those afforded to the three state religions, including import duty exemptions for humanitarian and development projects.

Organizations apply for registration with the Directorate of Religious Affairs in the MTA. A religious group must submit its statutes, statement of doctrine, bylaws, names and addresses of executive board members, its leader's religious credentials, a site use agreement and map for religious facilities, and description of its finances. It must also pay a registration fee of 150,000 CFA francs (\$250). Criteria for recognition include the 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 Directorate of Religious Affairs 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. Officials routinely grant these requests.

The public school curriculum does not include religion classes. There are many Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic schools, to which the government assigns its own paid employees as additional teachers and staff. Other registered religious groups have the right to establish schools, as long as they meet accreditation standards.

The constitution prohibits the establishment of political parties based on religion. Private religious radio stations are forbidden from airing political broadcasts.

Government Practices

According to the MTA, since 1990 1,323 religious groups have applied for registration, of which 488 were approved. The MTA stated that many applications languished because they did not have complete information or the proper registration fee. Applicants were able to continue their religious activities while awaiting registration. The ministry acknowledged that unregistered groups awaiting review by the MTA faced obstacles such as obtaining building permits for places of worship.

The MTA presented a new regulation on worship practices to the Council of Ministers in September. The government previously consulted with leaders of 11 religious communities on the new regulation, which it said was drafted with a view to guaranteeing freedom of worship while respecting the communities in which religious groups were based. The stated intent was to resolve some of the conflicts that regularly arose between religious groups and surrounding communities, primarily over noise from services and worship practices. The MTA said the proposed regulation will be enacted by decree and was not publicly available. The council had not yet acted on the proposal as of the end of the year.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to the Directorate for Religious Affairs, disputes arose over new churches that established themselves within neighborhoods, particularly those led by religious leaders from Nigeria. Local residents complained that these congregations worshiped too loudly, and often late at night, using drums. The MTA reported it received regular complaints about noise during the year, but was not able to provide specifics on any of the disputes and whether or how they were resolved. These complaints reportedly often focused on evangelical parishes, led by charismatic leaders who presided over services employing musical instruments and loud praying. In the Gbenedji district of Lome, neighbors complained that an evangelical church held services all weekend and on Fridays as well, according to a news report in August.

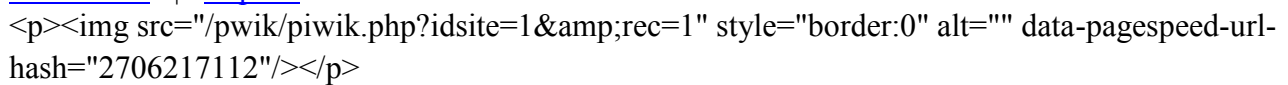
Members of different religious groups regularly invited one another to their respective ceremonies. Marriage between persons of different religious groups was common.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with the MTA during the year to discuss religious freedom. The Ambassador and other embassy officials raised issues of religious freedom and tolerance with Catholic bishops, Muslim leaders, and traditional chiefs. On July 9, embassy officials hosted religious leaders from Lome's Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant communities, government officials, representatives of the diplomatic corps, and other civil society representatives at an interfaith iftar. The event was designed in part to promote respect and good relations among the country's various religious groups.

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