2015 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.

Religious leaders promoted interfaith dialogue quarterly through the National Framework for Interfaith Dialogue.

During a May visit, the Department of State Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs met with a number of senior government representatives to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. He met separately with a variety of religious leaders and members of civil society. The embassy met with prominent members from Muslim, Christian, and Voodoo communities to discuss the promotion of peaceful religious coexistence and to combat religious intolerance between Muslim and Christian communities. The embassy held monthly discussions with the heads of six religious radio stations and offered grants to develop programs focused on promoting religious tolerance in local communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.4 million (July 2015 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, followers of the Unification Church, and Eckankar followers. 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 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 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 of administrative materials (including the applicant's 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 ($83). If a group is not registered, the Ministry of Interior will order the closing of the religious facilities until the group is registered.

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

Government Practices

On September 4, the minister in charge of relations with institutions met with members of civil society and religious and traditional leaders. He encouraged them to foster dialogue among themselves to advance religious understanding and freedom and to promote social peace.

The government, with the support of the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States, and the National Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization hosted an international symposium in Cotonou from May 26-28, on the theme "African Initiative on Education for Peace and Development through Inter-religious and Intercultural Dialogue." More than 100 religious leaders from across the world participated in the event to discuss the promotion of durable peace in Africa through interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

Government officials attended inductions, funerals, and other religious ceremonies organized by various groups. 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

Unlike the previous year, there were no reports of conflict that required police intervention between Voodoo practitioners and other religious communities.

Interfaith dialogue occurred regularly. The National Framework for Interfaith Dialogue, which included the major religious groups, held quarterly sessions to discuss religious coexistence and advance interfaith cooperation. The Community of Sant'Egidio coordinated a meeting in Cotonou on September 12, gathering delegates from the Muslim and Christian communities and from the association of indigenous religions to discuss peaceful coexistence among religious groups. On April 11, more than 600 youth from the Benin chapter of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Association held a parade in Porto-Novo as part of its national convention to showcase religious tolerance and to call for peace, justice, and solidarity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

During a May visit, the Department of State Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs met with a number of senior government representatives to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. He also attended the first International Symposium on Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue. International participants in the symposium committed to lobby their national parliaments to fund peace and tolerance programs. The Special Representative also met separately with a variety of religious leaders and members of civil society, most of whom underlined the tradition of peaceful coexistence among the country's religious groups. He emphasized the importance of religious leaders promoting interreligious understanding in order to combat religious intolerance and increase religious freedom. Concrete outcomes included a group of religious radio stations committing to collaborate on anti-corruption programming. The Special Representative was given unprecedented access to local mosques and held candid conversations with traditionally private religious figures, including Voodoo priests. The embassy continued these conversations in developing programs on interfaith dialogue.

Embassy officials made a trip to Djougou and Parakou, in the north, from August 15-16, where they met with imams, leaders of various Quranic schools, a Catholic bishop, and other Christian leaders to encourage religious tolerance.

The embassy supported activities proposed by local religious figures and government officials who sought to promote religious freedom and tolerance; for example, the embassy hosted six religious radio station directors monthly for meetings to discuss strategies to educate their audiences on the subject. In this regard, the embassy offered $2,000 grants to each of the six radio stations to assist them in developing media content to educate and influence their respective audiences on religious extremism, tolerance, and anticorruption.

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