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2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Cote 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.

Religious leaders continued to partner with local law enforcement and subnational government leadership on security matters to prevent violent extremism and protect their communities from the growing terrorist threat from the Sahel. Religious leaders said they had generally positive working relationships with the government but that some government officials continued to believe that members of certain religious denominations were automatically loyal to specific political figures. While secularism is embedded in national law, one religious leader said the state had sometimes preferred certain religions over others in such matters as allocation of government financial support and tax exonerations for religious groups. The government temporarily detained a Christian pastor for what it said was threatening public order with inflammatory comments on social media. While some religious leaders called for his arrest, another such leader expressed concern that the arrest infringed on freedom of speech. The government accredited 547 Islamic schools, a sharp increase, as Muslim advocacy groups pushed Islamic schools to adopt the standard curriculum and seek accreditation. The government continued to fund Christian religious pilgrimages and resumed doing so for Muslims after Saudi Arabia lifted some COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Muslim and Christian leaders, including representatives of the Supreme Council of Imams, Mosques, and Islamic Affairs of Cote d'Ivoire (COSIM, the country's main Sunni Muslim association) and the Catholic, evangelical Christian, and Methodist Churches, reported generally good relations with each other and among their communities, although there were two reported instances of local Christian and Muslim groups disagreeing over the use of land to build additional churches. Additionally, there were two localized conflicts between animists and a Christian denomination over the right to hold Christian worship services at the same time as certain animist ceremonies. The incidents involved vandalism against churches. In one case, a Christian suffered a broken collarbone. Religious leaders and civil society representatives continued to state that in light of the importance of religion in society, religious leaders were seen as influential in maintaining peace and reconciliation and guarding against political manipulation of national identity, ethnicity, and religious differences to foment division in the country. They also stated religious leaders were broadly united in working together to accomplish

these objectives. Some Muslim leaders stated their community acted to prevent the influence of what they called intolerant forms of Islam, including 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.

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials to discuss the state of religious freedom and tolerance in the country. Topics included whether the government had recorded 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. The Ambassador and other embassy representatives regularly met with religious leaders in the capital and around the country. The embassy hosted religious community leaders for roundtable discussions on issues including religious tolerance and Christian-Muslim relations. The Ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar in April focused on religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 28.7 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2021 census, the country has a total population of 29.4 million, of which 42.5 percent are Muslim and 39.8 percent Christian. 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 represent 17 percent of the population; Methodists 2.3 percent; Harrists (a group that follows the teachings of William Wade Harris, a Liberian who evangelized in Cote d'Ivoire in the early 20th century) 0.5 percent; and other Christians, including evangelicals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Southern Baptists, Greek Orthodox, Copts, the Celestial Church of Christ, and Assemblies of God, 20 percent. Animists constitute 2.2 percent of the population; adherents of other religions groups, including Buddhists, Baha'is, Rastafarians, followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jews, and Bossonists (who follow traditions of the Akan ethnic group) collectively total 0.7 percent; and 12.6 percent identify as following no religion. 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 to notify the government of their existence. Foreign religious groups with a presence in the country require authorization from the Minister of Interior and Security, and all religious groups – foreign and local – must register with the DGC. 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. Local religious groups are allowed to operate for two months without official approval after they submit their registration application. 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.

To register, a group must apply to the DGC with its bylaws, names of the founding members and board members, date of founding, and general assembly minutes. 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.

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 (\$33,000-\$65,000). 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 (\$813-\$8,000).

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, there were reports of several violent skirmishes between unidentified violent extremists and the country's security forces, resulting in fatalities, as well as a series of arson attacks generally attributed to violent extremists. In both types of incidents, there were few details available, including about the identity of the perpetrators. In recent years, al-Qa'ida affiliate Jamaat'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), based in the Sahel region, has threatened to expand into the northern part of the country from the Sahel, and the JNIM subgroup Katiba Macina, also known as the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), carried out several fatal attacks on the country's security forces. Government and civil society sources expressed concern that these groups and others would continue to increase their presence in the country and recruit from vulnerable populations, such as unemployed youth. To counter this threat, religious leaders continued to partner with local law enforcement and subnational government leadership on security matters to prevent violent extremism and protect their communities from what they stated was the growing terrorist threat. This included information sharing, monitoring of social media and other communication channels, and supporting efforts for youth employment and engagement in society.

In March, the government arrested Joachin Kouamé N'Guessan, charging him with threatening public order with religious speeches he broadcast on social media. N'Guessan stated he was a reincarnation of Jesus Christ and frequently warned of the pending end of days. Some religious leaders expressed disapproval of his speeches and concern they might cause persons to harm themselves or others. The government acted following the leaders' calls for it to stop N'Guessan. A leader of a Christian denomination, however, shared concern that the arrest infringed on freedom of speech. He argued that N'Guessan's words were bizarre but not dangerous and that they did not merit imprisonment. N'Guessan was released in April under judicial supervision that required him to stop using social media until his case ran its course.

Many citizens looked to religious leaders to help reduce politically motivated conflict and guard against political manipulation of national identity, ethnicity, and religious differences to foment division in the country. The Alliance of Religions for Peace in Cote d'Ivoire, composed of religious leaders representing the Catholic, evangelical, and Muslim communities, made statements promoting social cohesion and political reconciliation and stated it was planning activities to advance those objectives heading into the 2023 municipal, regional, and senatorial elections. Leaders from the three faiths advanced the alliance during the year through a reinforced structure, charter, and joint commitments.

Leaders of Christian denominations said they had generally positive working relationships with the government, but they also said that some government officials continued to believe that members of certain religions denominations were automatically loyal to specific political figures. In this case, the leaders said, the stereotype persisted that certain Christian denominations were loyal to opposition parties. The leaders of the Christian groups stated that this was not the case and that denominations had no political loyalties. Additionally, a leader of one Christian denomination 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 representative, allocation of government funds to the denomination dropped significantly during the year, while prominent Muslim groups did not report decreases in funding. He added that the government did not always apply tax exonerations in an equal and transparent manner.

During the year, the Muslim community, led by the National Platform for Islamic Education, successfully advocated increased accreditation of Islamic schools. The platform coordinated evaluations of 3,416 schools during the year, 547 of which received accreditation, affecting

approximately 105,000 students. In addition, the Ministry of National Education and Literacy trained 2,406 Islamic school teachers on how to implement the standard national curriculum. The platform expressed optimism that the number of accredited Islamic schools would continue to grow in coming years. Islamic schools, unlike the majority of Christian schools, historically operated without formal accreditation from the Ministry of National Education and Literacy.

As of late October, the DGC reported the government had funded pilgrimages for 1,563 Christians to locations in Portugal, Spain, Israel, and France. The government also resumed financing pilgrimages to Mecca, funding the travel of 3,657 Muslims, after Saudi Arabia lifted some travel restrictions to the country linked to COVID-19. According to COSIM, the number of Muslims traveling to Mecca was lower than the usual, prepandemic level of 7,000 pilgrims, due in part to some continuing COVID-19 restrictions in Saudi Arabia.

The DGC stated that when its representatives attended events organized by religious groups (e.g., ceremonies, conferences, and festivals), those representatives used speaking opportunities to exhort audiences to disseminate messages of peace and tolerance through all mediums of communication, with the goal of promoting social cohesion. The DGC added that the country's official *2021-2025 National Development Plan* includes a specific goal of leveraging religion to improve social cohesion. This plan includes training in promoting secularism in politics and combatting extremism in religious communities.

The DGC stated that many unregistered local religious groups operated in the country, which it said was due to the group leaders' lack of knowledge or understanding of registration requirements. The DGC stated that when informed of the registration requirement, some religious leaders were puzzled, because they did not understand the purpose of the government's involvement in a personal matter like the practice of religion. The DGC registered 337 religious groups during the year and, contrary to what had previously been reported, said it regularly rejected a "significant number" of registration applications, the vast majority of which were by groups that did not respect rules around noise pollution and approved hours for loud ceremonies.

High-ranking government officials met with religious leaders and attended religious events throughout the year. For example, President Alassane Dramane Ouattara, a Muslim, traveled to The Vatican in September and met with Pope Francis.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Leaders of a Christian denomination reported four instances of interfaith conflict during the year. In February in Golipla, a village in the western region, a group of animists requested that Christians stay home when animists held a mask ceremony on a Sunday because they said prayer from other groups would interfere with their practices. Nevertheless, Christian groups held religious services. That evening, youths from the animist community vandalized local churches. A similar event took place in the central part of the country in July near the village of Beoumi. While authorities did not report any deaths, at least seven churches experienced vandalism (e.g., broken windows, doors, and equipment), and one member of the Christian community who tried to protect his church suffered a broken collarbone. In addition, there were two cases of conflict between a Christian denomination and the Muslim community in Tanda Department relating to land access in the north of the country. In both cases, local Muslims resisted the construction of new churches, either vandalizing construction sites (e.g., destroying bricks and other building material on site) or blocking access to existing places of

worship. Neither of the incidents resulted in death or severe injury, and the churches eventually continued construction after local officials intervened.

Religious leaders and civil society representatives again stated that leaders across the religious spectrum were broadly united in their desire to work toward peace and reconciliation following the 2010-11 postelectoral crisis and the upheaval surrounding the 2020 presidential election. They shared optimism for the municipal, regional, and senatorial elections due in 2023 but saw themselves as playing an important role in encouraging peace and stability.

COSIM President Cheickul Aima Ousmane Diakité, Catholic Archbishop of Abidjan Cardinal Jean-Pierre Kutwa, and Federation of Evangelical Churches of Cote d'Ivoire President Seri Boagnon Apollinaire all stated that religious freedom and tolerance continued to be the cultural norm in the country. A COSIM religious leader charged with interfaith relations, Imam Bachir Ouattara, stated that he continued to have strong relationships with Christian leaders. Leaders of the Federation of Evangelical Churches of Cote d'Ivoire said they had good relations with leaders of the country's major religions. Catholic and Methodist leaders echoed this sentiment. Christian and Muslim leaders in the northern part of the country reported generally good relations. Some community radio stations reported reserving broadcast time for different religious groups to conduct prayers on Fridays and Sundays.

According to religious leaders and civil society organizations, numerous individuals regularly celebrated each other's religious holidays by attending household or neighborhood gatherings and religious ceremonies, regardless of their own faith.

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 reported that, as in the previous year and contrary to earlier tradition, some imams no longer offered temporary shelter in mosques to male travelers not known to their communities due to fear these travelers might have ties to terrorist or criminal groups.

Christian groups also increased their efforts to combat extremism. For example, the Federation of Evangelical Churches of Cote d'Ivoire created 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 antiextremist training missions consumed approximately one-third of the federation's operating budget. For example, the federation's monitoring group conducted training in September in Bouna, a city near the Burkina Faso border, to give evangelical clergy tools to resist radicalization in the area. The training was open to Catholic and Muslim leaders as well. The federation was also organizing larger events on religious tolerance in Korhogo and Bouaké scheduled for 2023. Muslim and Catholic leaders expressed interest in attending. In addition, the Catholic Church, through its Justice and Peace Committee, worked with local communities to improve social cohesion and their understanding of the rule of law. For example, on October 5, a team from Saint Francois-Xavier Catholic Church in Anono, a neighborhood of Abidjan, partnered with the Harrist community to ceremonially welcome five members of a local mosque who had recently completed the Hajj. The ceremony's aim was to congratulate the community's Muslim members, share a meal and prayer, and demonstrate the importance of interreligious understanding.

Government sources and civil society leaders said that religiously based hate speech sometimes was used on social media, but they did not cite any examples and stated that influential political and religious leaders did not use such language. Several Muslim and Christian religious leaders stated there was a gradual increase in extremism and hate speech among their followers, particularly in rural areas.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials discussed the state of religious freedom and tolerance in the country with government officials. Specifically, embassy officials met with the DGC and discussed, among other topics, whether the government had recorded 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.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with senior Christian and Muslim religious leaders across the country. Embassy representatives convened religious community leaders for roundtable discussions on issues that included religious tolerance and the status of relations between Christian and Muslim groups.

In April, the Ambassador hosted an iftar at his residence. Representatives from almost all of the country's religious groups attended, including Muslim, Catholic, evangelical Christian, Methodist, Baptist, Jewish, Bahai, Mahikari, and the Church of Jesus Christ. The conversation focused on social cohesion and reinforcing religious freedom.

In April, the embassy's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility Council organized a panel discussion on interfaith dialogue that included Muslim, Catholic, evangelical, Buddhist, and Jewish representatives. The conversation focused on the importance of interfaith dialogue to increase understanding and build bridges to promote religious freedom. Embassy staff also delivered dried food and other goods to religious organizations during religious holidays for distribution to needy members.

During the year, the Ambassador met separately with leaders of COSIM, including its President, Cheickul Aima Diakité, Catholic Cardinal Kutwa, and Boagnon Apollinaire, President of the Federation of Evangelical Churches of Cote d'Ivoire. Throughout the year, embassy officials met with representatives from the Muslim, Catholic, evangelical Christian, Methodist, and Jewish communities. Topics included these religious groups' relations with the government, the role of religious leaders in promoting peace and reconciliation, relations between different religious groups, and the status of religious freedom and tolerance in the country.

The embassy funded a program that promoted interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance by establishing, strengthening, and engaging with an interfaith dialogue platform across the north of the country. The platform, known as the National Platform for Interfaith Dialogue for the Fight against Violent Extremism, had 15 local branches. Its members included imams, Catholic priests, evangelical pastors, and youth and women from various religious denominations. Through the platform, religious leaders worked to prevent intercommunal, political, and electoral violence. For example, the platform

developed a communication network in Bouaké through which local religious leaders can share information related to extremist risks and escalate to local authorities. It also mediated a conflict between the Baoulé and Malinké populations in Beoumi through a group prayer at the local prefect's house.

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Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of
Origin and Asylum Research and
Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041
Wien
T +43 1 589 00 583
F +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
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F.A.Q.
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