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Cote d'Ivoire

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice, although ethnic discrimination paralleling differences in religious affiliation and resulting from the ongoing political conflict continued.

The Government continued to experience political instability as a result of the failed coup attempt of 2002 that led to a de facto division between the northern and southern regions of the country. Since 2003 numerous peace accords, including the Linas-Marcoussis Accord, have been signed between the major parties involved in the conflict, but none has resulted in sustained peace or reconciliation.

Although the country's political conflict lay along ethnic rather than religious lines, political and religious affiliations tended to follow ethnic lines; consequently, some religious groups have been especially impacted by the conflict. Many ethnic northerners, for example, were Muslim. As a result, many Muslims were assumed to be and were targeted as suspected rebels and rebel sympathizers by the Government during the reporting period.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion although, relations among the various religious groups were at times strained as a consequence of the continuing political crisis. Strong efforts by religious and civil society groups helped prevent the political crisis from turning into a religious conflict; however, there continued to be some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of traditional indigenous religions.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. government officials also meet regularly with religious leaders, both individually and as a group, and have engaged them in projects to advance religious tolerance and conciliation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 124,500 square miles and a population of approximately 18 million. An estimated 35 to 40 percent of the country was Christian or syncretistic, practicing a mixture of Christian and indigenous religions. Approximately 35 percent of the population was Muslim, while an estimated 25 to 30 percent of the population practiced traditional indigenous religions. Many persons who were nominally Christians or Muslims also practiced some aspects of traditional indigenous religions, particularly as economic or political conditions worsened.

Christian sub groups found in the country included the Roman Catholic Church, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Southern Baptist Church, the Coptics, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The largest Protestant church was the Protestant Methodist Church of Cote d'Ivoire. Evangelical groups such as the Shekinah Glory Ministries and the Assemblies of God also were active. Syncretistic churches included the Harrist Church (an African Protestant denomination founded in the country in 1913 by a Liberian preacher named William Wade Harris), the Primitive Protestant Church, God's Soldiers (founded by an Ivoirian woman), and the Messianic Church. Bossonism, a traditional religious practice from the Akan ethnic group, was also practiced.

Other religions with a presence in the country included Buddhism, the Baha'i Faith, and the International Association for the Conscience of Krishna. Additionally, many religious groups in the country were associated with religious groups in the United States

Approximately 70 percent of foreigners living in the country were Muslim and 20 percent were Christian, with small percentages practicing other religions, including Judaism.

There has been an increase in the membership of evangelical churches. Missionary work, urbanization, immigration, and higher education levels were also believed to have contributed to a decline in the percentage of practitioners of traditional religions. Generally, practitioners of traditional religions have followed a trend of conversion to Christianity and Islam.

Muslims were found in the greatest numbers in the northern half of the country, however, they were becoming increasingly numerous in the cities throughout the country due to immigration, migration, and interethnic marriages. According to the most recent census (1998), Muslims composed 45.5 percent of the total urban population and 33.5 percent of the total rural population.

Both Catholics and Protestants were found in the southern and central regions. Additionally, Catholics were concentrated in the east, while Protestants were also found in the southwest. Practitioners of traditional indigenous religions were concentrated in rural areas of the country. Generally, the north was associated with Islam and the south with Christianity and other traditional religions.

Political and religious affiliations tended to follow ethnic lines. For example, the Mende and Voltaic groups, which included the Malinke and Senufo people, were largely Muslim. The Akan ethnic group, which included the Baoule and Agni people, tended to be Catholic. There was also some correlation between religion and political affiliations and socio-economic class. For example, most Muslims favored the opposition Rally of Republicans (RDR) party; additionally, the merchant class was mostly Muslim.

Immigrants from other parts of Africa were at least nominally Muslim or Christian.

Missionaries were active in the country and were primarily from the United States and Europe--the most prevalent missionaries being from the Baptist Church.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. Although there is no state religion, the Government informally favors Christianity for historical and ethnic reasons.

In the past, the Government informally favored the Roman Catholic Church and, consequently, gave Catholic Church leaders a much stronger voice in government affairs than their Islamic counterparts. Such preferential treatment led to feelings of disenfranchisement among some Muslims.

Muslims continued to be underrepresented in the legislature, largely because the RDR political party, dominated by Muslims, boycotted the last legislative elections in 2000. During the reporting period, Muslims represented nine out of thirty-one ministers in the transitional government's cabinet. In the previous government of National Reconciliation, formed after the January 2003 Linas-Marcoussis peace accords, Muslims made up twelve of forty ministers.

In addition to the legislature, Muslims continued to be disproportionately underrepresented in media outlets, such as radio and television, as well. Of the approximately eighty-eight radio frequencies in the government-controlled zone, for example, there were seven Catholic frequencies, one evangelical, and one Muslim. The Muslim community tried to apply for more radio frequencies in the early 1990s but were unsuccessful in their attempt.

The armed forces were dominated by southerners, few of whom were Muslim. Christian members of the military are offered access to chaplains, and Muslim members are allowed time to pray. Since many of the leaders of the 2002 attempted coup were Muslim northerners, Muslims in the military generally kept a low profile. Although the position of Muslim military chaplain was created in 1967, it was only in 2003 that a Muslim military chaplain was designated. During the reporting period, seven active-duty Muslim soldiers went on pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Government observes major Muslim and Christian religious holidays. The recognized Muslim holy days are Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha (Tabaski Day), Layla tul-Qadr (Night of Destiny), and Maulid al-Nabi (the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad). The recognized Christian holy days are Christmas, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Pentecost Monday, and All Saints' Day.

In the past the Government paid for the construction of a Catholic cathedral. The Plateau Mosque in central Abidjan, a project started in 1994 under the direction of the Government, remained unfinished. No progress on the mosque occurred since shortly after the outbreak of the rebellion in 2002, due to a withdrawal of financial support from Islamic Arab governments concerned over the country's decreased stability.

The law requires religious groups to register with the Government. In accordance with the 1960 law governing associations, all religious groups wishing to operate in the country must submit a file including the group's by-laws, names of the founding members, date of founding (or the date on which the founder received the revelation of his or her calling), general assembly minutes, the names of members of the administrative board, and other information to the Ministry of Territorial Administration. The Ministry of Territorial Administration investigates through the Ministry of Security the backgrounds of the founding members to ensure that the group has no politically subversive members or purpose. Despite this thorough registration process, no religious group had complained of arbitrary registration

procedures or problems with gaining government recognition. Traditional indigenous religious groups were less formally organized, and none had applied for registration or recognition. There is no evidence that indigenous groups would be denied if they were to apply.

The Government grants no tax or other benefits to religious groups; however, some religious groups gained favors through individual negotiations. Examples include reductions in the cost of resident alien registration, customs exemptions on certain religious items, diplomatic passports for major religious chiefs, and, in some cases, privileges similar to those of diplomats. No particular religion has been favored consistently in this manner.

Foreign missionaries must meet the same requirements for residency as any foreigner, including registering as resident aliens and obtaining national identification cards. There were no reports that foreign missionaries were denied such registration arbitrarily.

The Government recognizes and oversees all schools, regardless of religion, that meet certain nationally established curriculum requirements. The national curriculum was the minimum standard of teaching in sciences and liberal arts; schools operated by religious groups were free to also teach and regulate their own religion courses.

Religious instruction is permitted in public schools and is usually offered outside of normal class hours by established Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant groups, including evangelical churches. The Government did not interfere with Muslim, Catholic or Protestant groups that wished to provide religious instruction in public schools during students' vacation breaks.

Religious instruction in private schools varied. Some private schools included religious instruction in their curriculum, some allowed religious groups to teach religion during students' vacation breaks, and some did not allow any religious instruction. In theory, the Government subsidizes private secondary schools, although arrears have been accumulating for several years. Some of these subsidized schools are run by Christian groups. Muslim groups operate only primary schools, although a Muslim school in Daloa is trying to build a secondary school.

The Government recognized several Muslim schools as official schools whose curriculum would be overseen by the State for the first time. One such school, Iqra, was founded in 2003 by the Islamic National Council (CNI) for kindergarten and primary school children in Abidjan. The school is the largest of its kind and enrolled approximately 300 Muslim children in 2005. Students followed the state's official curriculum with the addition of prayer and instruction in traditional Muslim values. During the reporting period, Iqra received books, computers, and teaching materials from western embassies, including the U.S. and Canadian embassies. The school was built entirely with funds from the Islamic Development Bank received through the CNI.

Unlike in the past, the Government did not give any money to religious associations other than schools during the reporting period. During the period covered by this report, the Government took positive steps to promote interfaith understanding. Government officials, including the president and his religious advisers, appeared at major religious celebrations and events organized by a wide variety of faiths and religious groups. The Government often invited leaders of various religious communities, including the Mediation Committee for National Reconciliation, the Forum of Religious Confessions, and the Collective of Religious Confessions for National Reconciliation and Peace to attend official ceremonies and to sit on deliberative and advisory committees. In July 2005 the minister of religion held a debate among various religious groups on the convergence of religion, civilization, and culture.

During the period covered by this report, President Gbagbo continued to meet with Muslims leaders to discuss their particular concerns. For example, on March 17, 2006, the president received members of the Higher Council of Imams and the National Islamic Council (CNI), who presented a memorandum of their proposed solutions to the political crisis, which was rooted in questions of citizenship and which has negatively impacted many Muslims. These proposals condemned discrimination against Muslims on the basis of their ethnic origins and sought to promote tolerance. Despite their intentions, the discussions resulted in few changes and were, ultimately, unsuccessful in alleviating the country's deep political and ethnic divisions.

As with Muslim groups, President Gbagbo continued to meet frequently with traditional chiefs to listen to their concerns; however, such meetings were also unsuccessful in bridging the deep political and ethnic divisions and promoting greater social inclusion of all religions.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports that the Government monitored minority religious groups for what it considered to be subversive political activity.

Beginning with the 2001 Forum for National Reconciliation, the Government initiated several programs aimed at improving relations between the Government and religious groups; however, many Muslims continued to believe that they were targets of discrimination by the Government, since they were often perceived as being rebel sympathizers. The perception of discrimination amongst Muslims lessened with the creation of the power sharing Government of

National Reconciliation in 2003 and appointment of Muslims to key government positions including the prime ministry, high chancellorship, national assembly presidency, and various ministerial positions; however, these appointments did not end the social or political exclusion of certain groups.

Many northern Muslims continued to feel discriminated against when applying for identity cards which document their citizenship. As northern citizens, they complained that, when applying for passports, they were asked to provide more documents than applicants from southern ethnic groups which are predominantly non-Muslim. Additionally, there were reports that police officers confiscated or destroyed identity cards belonging to northern citizens, telling them they should apply as foreigners for a resident permit (*carte de séjour*). Government security forces were also reportedly more likely to extort payments at checkpoints from northerners and foreigners than from southern citizens. Although discrimination in the distribution of identity cards was based on regional and ethnic backgrounds rather than religious ones, the fact that many northerners were Muslims while many southerners were non-Muslim resulted in government actions that disadvantaged Muslims in this process. While lack of an identification card was not an obstacle to obtaining employment, those without the cards were unable to vote; consequently, many Muslims from the north who were denied identity cards were excluded politically.

In contrast to their relationship with the Government, many northern Muslims believed that the rebel New Forces group supported their efforts against discrimination by making the issuance of identification cards, once again, a key demand in the peace process. The new prime minister, in place since December 2005, made the implementation of a national identification process one of his top priorities. While the prime minister's goal was to have this process completed in time for the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, which have been postponed since 2005 and were scheduled before the conclusion of 2006, this process had barely begun by the end of the period covered by this report.

Another point of friction between the Government and Muslim groups were Hajj trips. Each year President Gbagbo used state funds to pay for a small, politically selected group of Muslims to make the Hajj pilgrimage. Private Islamic organizations also organized groups to make the Hajj, under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior to protect the pilgrims from problems that occurred in the past with fraudulent travel agencies. The Government's requirements were somewhat stricter than those of the Saudi government. For example, it required a minimum of one hundred pilgrims per group, whereas the Saudis require fifty pilgrims per incoming group, in addition to a doctor, nurse, and religious leader. The Government also required any group seeking to organize Hajj pilgrims to have been in existence for three to four years.

Some Muslim organizations continued to view the Government's additional organizational requirements for Hajj pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia as unnecessary and unwarranted interference in religious affairs, considering that Christian churches organize several Christian pilgrimages throughout the year without government supervision. In 2003 the Islamic Umma Front and the National Trade Union of Couriers asked the Government to liberalize the Hajj process so that pilgrims could organize the trips more easily without government involvement. A Ministry of Religion official responded to this request by stating that the Government must be involved in the organization of the Hajj since it involved 3,000 to 4,000 citizens leaving the country each year. During the reporting period, the prime minister's office supported Hajj travelers by chartering a plane to send 485 pilgrims to Mecca after they were defrauded by an unreliable travel agency.

Like some Muslims, practitioners of traditional indigenous religions also experienced political exclusion. Although there is no generally accepted system for classifying the country's diverse traditional religious practices, which vary by ethnic group, village, family, gender, and age group, members of the country's largely Christian and Islamic urban elite that were heavily influence the state, generally appeared disinclined to allow traditional indigenous religions the social status accorded to Christianity and Islam. Despite the resistance to traditional religions, at the beginning of important ceremonies, traditional chiefs were often invited to participate in traditional libation ceremonies aimed at recognizing ancestors at the beginning of important ceremonies.

There were no reports on restrictions of religious freedom in the rebel-controlled northern 60 percent of the country.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were no arrests in a 2004 incident in which someone shot at five imams of the executive committee of the High Council of Imams.

In March 2006 officials from the district of Abidjan attempted to destroy a mosque built on public space in the area of Marcory, a mixed faith community, in order to allow a private citizen to build a supermarket. The local imam presented a document signed by the Marcory police superintendent in 1990 authorizing the construction of the mosque. The mayor of Marcory intervened, and although the imam's house was destroyed, the mosque itself was spared.

Conditions for Christian religious groups in rebel-controlled areas of the north and west remained the same. Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of Christians being unable to practice as they wished.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

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

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Relations among the various religious groups became strained after the outbreak of the 2002 national crisis. Some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of traditional indigenous religions continued during the reporting period.

Northerners, many of whom are Muslim, frequently experienced discrimination on the basis of their ethnic or regional origin. Based on these factors, many were presumed to support the presidential candidacy of former prime minister Alassane Ouattara, a Muslim.

Followers of traditional indigenous religions were also subject to societal discrimination. Some Christians and Muslims refused to associate with practitioners of traditional indigenous religions. Many Christian or Islamic leaders disparaged practitioners of traditional indigenous religions as "pagans" or practitioners of "black magic," even though many indigenous religions discourage such practices. Despite these hostile attitudes towards indigenous religions, many practitioners of traditional indigenous religions were unaware of or did not consider themselves victims of societal discrimination, nor did they complain about their treatment.

Prior to the 2002 crisis, there were examples of long-standing cooperation amongst religious groups, evidenced by interfaith prayer vigils, services, and events. Since the start of the conflict, religious leaders from diverse groups have assembled on their own initiative to mediate tensions. Interfaith activities saw a decrease in activity during the past year due to a lack of funding. While religious leaders continued to attend each other's main religious celebrations as symbolic acts of reconciliation, few if any, leaders of traditional indigenous religious groups have been included in these interfaith initiatives.

The Forum of Religious Confessions (The Forum) is an interfaith organization that endeavors to promote dialogue, increase understanding, and improve relationships among religious leaders and groups. It is headed by the leader of the Celestial Christian Church. The Research Group in Democracy and Social and Economic Development of Cote d'Ivoire (GERDDES-CI) created the forum, which engages leaders of many of the country's religious groups, including Catholics, Muslims, various Protestant groups, several syncretist groups, the Association of Traditional Priests, and the Bossonists, an association of indigenous Akan religious priests. Previously the Ministry of Religion cooperated closely and regularly with the Forum; however, this ministry was absorbed into the Ministry of Interior when Prime Minister Banny's government was formed in January 2006. The new Department of Religion within the Ministry of Interior was less involved with the Forum.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Since the onset of the political crisis in 2002, when rebel forces seized control of the northern 60 percent of the country, the U.S. embassy assisted efforts by the Government and nongovernmental organizations to mitigate religious tensions in the country. To assist in this way, the U.S. ambassador and other U.S. government officials regularly met with religious leaders. For example, on March 16, 2006, the embassy hosted an interfaith women's round-table discussion entitled "Women of Faith: Agents of Peace, Reconciliation, and Tolerance." Fifty Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant women discussed ways to promote religious and political tolerance.

This event followed an earlier roundtable discussion organized by the embassy on October 22, 2005. The discussion involved fifty Muslim women of various backgrounds, including journalists, politicians, professors, students, and professional women of various descriptions, and was entitled "Muslim Women: What Is Their Role in the Reconciliation Process?" The discussion was wide-ranging and emphasized the importance of promoting tolerance, educating communities about how to avoid discrimination and prejudice, making efforts to get to know women from other faith communities, and making peaceful overtures to all.

During the reporting period, three religious leaders from Cote d'Ivoire--an imam, a priest, and a pastor--traveled to the United States on a program called "Religion and the Community." Participants explored religious diversity by meeting with American Muslims, Catholics, and Protestants, in addition to adherents of smaller American religious groups, to discuss how their communities address tolerance and religious freedom issues. They also met with the largest faith-based cable network in the United States to learn more about religious diversity in the media.

On February 27, 2006, the embassy hosted a digital videoconference entitled "Martin Luther King: A Model of Religious Non-Violence and Reconciliation Efforts." The discussion focused on King's legacy as a role model for tolerance. Thirty-five guests, including imams, priests, pastors, a Muslim member of the National Assembly, leaders of women's religious groups, and faithful laypersons engaged in an exchange with the speaker, a former U.S. diplomat. The speaker highlighted America's efforts to promote ethnic and religious tolerance. Following the presentation, the participants discussed the tenets of King's teachings relevant to the country's crisis. Those in attendance agreed to work on strengthening the protection of minorities, renouncing violence, promoting interfaith cooperation, and teaching tolerance and acceptance from an early age, in each of their communities.

Embassy officials met with a broad range of nongovernmental organizations that work on religious freedom and tolerance issues throughout the reporting period.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)