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2022 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. All religious groups must register as religious associations with the government and apply for authorization to open places of worship with the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA) in the Ministry of Territorial Affairs (MTA).

In June and August after recurring complaints concerning noise levels, the government announced it had closed 10 neo-charismatic churches (independent churches that emphasize the current availability of gifts of the Holy Spirit). Despite the requests by the closed churches and the religious associations to which they belong for clemency to resume religious services, the churches remained closed at year's end. During the year, as in previous years, the government refused to accept new applications for new places of worship, per a ministerial order. In a June statement, the Minister of Territorial Affairs urged district officials, prefects, and mayors to take the necessary steps to prohibit, in collaboration with security forces, the establishment of new places of worship. According to the government, many new places of worship were not constructed to an acceptable standard; many also generated complaints of excessive noise.

Members of different religious groups attended each other's ceremonies, and interfaith marriage remained common.

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious tolerance and pending legislation affecting religious groups with government officials. U.S. officials also met with religious leaders throughout the year to support

their efforts to reduce tensions in communities and support peace and social cohesion, specifically regarding countering violent extremism related to religion. The embassy continued to promote interreligious dialogue through grants to nongovernmental organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.5 million (midyear 2022). According to the U.S. government, the population is 42.3 percent Christian, 36.9 percent traditional animist, 14 percent Muslim, and less than 1 percent followers of other religions. Roman Catholics are the largest Christian group, approximately 25 percent of the population, according to the Togolese Conference of Bishops. Protestants include Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, Assemblies of God, and neo-charismatic movements. Other Christian groups include Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Nichiren Buddhists, followers of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Baha'is, and Hindus are among other religious groups in the country. Individuals unaffiliated with a religious group constitute less than one percent of the population.

Persons living in the south practice a mixture of different religions, while Muslims live predominately in the central and upper north regions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution states the country is a secular state, provides for equality before the law for all citizens regardless of religion, protects all religious beliefs, and prohibits religious discrimination. The constitution also provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship; 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 requires all religious groups, including indigenous groups, to register as religious associations. Some Christian and Islamic holidays are observed as national holidays. Official recognition as a religious association provides other groups the same rights as those afforded to Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims, including import duty exemptions for humanitarian and development projects. Registration entitles religious groups to receive government benefits such as government-provided teachers for faith-based schools and special assistance in case of natural disasters.

Organizations apply for registration with the DRA. A religious group must submit its statutes, statement of doctrine, bylaws, names and addresses

of executive board members, leaders' religious credentials, a site-use agreement, map for religious facilities, and description of its finances. It must also pay a registration fee of 150,000 CFA francs (\$244). Criteria for recognition include 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 DRA 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.

The public school curriculum does not include religion classes. The government assigns its own paid employees as additional teachers and staff to many Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic schools; UNESCO estimates 13 percent of religiously affiliated schools receive such assistance. Other registered religious groups have the right to establish schools if they meet accreditation standards.

The constitution prohibits the establishment of political parties based on religion. The law forbids private religious radio stations from broadcasting political material.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

In June, the MTA requested prefects and mayors to no longer authorize new places of worship. The central government transmitted this request to mayors and prefects via a ministerial stop-order and the media. The DRA released a statement in July about several thousand complaints concerning the high level of volume of worship services and religious observances and announced that sanctions would follow efforts to warn religious leaders about the noise. Although there was no law or regulation prescribing a permissible volume, the MTA and mayors recommended acceptable decibel levels through their notes to religious leaders. According to the Director of the DRA, Colonel Bediani Belei, the DRA would seize the audiovisual equipment and shut down places of worship that exceed a threshold of 55 decibels.

Similar to previous years, the government did not act on pending registration applications from religious groups and has not accepted new applications since 2013. Most pending registration applications came from Christian evangelical religious movements. The government did not provide a clear explanation for the delay. According to Christian religious organizations, the government returned the application files of some Christian groups without acting on them. They also stated that the

government applied the ministerial stop order only to Christians. In years prior, when COVID-19 restrictions were in force until mid-2021, the government cited those restrictions as justification for preventing religious groups from opening new places of worship and limited public gatherings. The cabinet did not act on a bill submitted to it by the MTA in July 2019 that had been pending since 2018 detailing the process for opening places of worship and regulating hours of operation and noise levels allowed during worship.

As in 2021, the MTA met with religious leaders to discuss the management of religious services in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the DRA convened a series of meetings with religious contacts throughout August to discuss initiatives to reduce the number of COVID-19 infections. During these meetings and in response to a spike in cases, the government requested religious establishments check for proof of vaccination prior to permitting members entrance to the religious premises.

In June and August after recurring complaints concerning noise levels, the government announced it had closed nine neo-charismatic churches: the Church of God in Christ, the Christian Church of the Redeemed of God, the Chapel Church of the Conquerors, the International Church of Mount Armenia, the Church of Power of Redemption, Missionary Church of Christ's Abundant Grace, Church of Christ's Awakening, Church of Christ's International Zoe Life Ministry, and the Almighty Mission Evangelical Ministry. The closed churches and the religious associations to which they belonged asked the government for clemency to resume religious services. The Christian community called for dialogue to solve problems of noise nuisance instead of punishment, arguing that muezzins calling Muslims to prayer and bars make noise freely at similar or greater decibel levels in the hours of sleep and that the government should not uphold a double standard. As of year's end, the churches remained closed.

On February 28 in the Grand-Lome region, the Ministry of Security and a Fulbe Community-based Organization organized a sensitization workshop on social cohesion for the leaders of the primarily Muslim Fulbe (Fulani) communities, religious leaders, and security and defense forces. The participants discussed transhumance (grazing) conflicts between primarily Muslim herders and primarily Christian farmers, religious and ethnic tolerance, and peaceful conflict resolution strategies. In August and September, the High Authority for Audiovisual and Communication and the High Commission for Reconciliation and Strengthening National Unity participated in sensitization campaigns and workshops on the role of journalists in fostering social cohesion, preventing violent extremism, and advancing peace and security.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to religious leaders, community members complained about the noise from religious observances. The DRA stated they addressed these complaints as they received them but noted limitations to its authority without the passage of the proposed law regulating religious institutions.

On September 5, authorities released from prison a voodoo priest named Kossi Edem Wodedzou (also known as Togbui Zewouto), whom the government sentenced in 2021 to two years in prison for burning a copy of the Bible and posting it on social media. Zewouto said he was protesting a Christian pastor's practice of burning voodoo fetishes on-camera.

Members of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim religious groups continued to invite one another to their respective ceremonies. Marriage between persons of different religious groups remained common.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials discussed the right of religious freedom as well as freedoms of association and expression in connection to pending legislation regarding religious groups and registration applications, as well as restrictions on public gatherings and the operation of places of worship in meetings with the Ministers of Territorial Affairs, of Security, and of Human Rights. Embassy officials also met with religious leaders to discuss their efforts to reduce tensions in communities and to support peace and social cohesion, specifically regarding countering violent extremism related to religion.

The embassy continued to support the Togolese branch of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, administering a \$250,000 U.S. government grant, awarded in 2020, to strengthen resilience against violent extremism, with a strong focus on interreligious dialogue.

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