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Cote d'Ivoire

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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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 2002 coup attempt that led to a de facto division between the northern and southern regions of the country. Since 2003 the major parties involved in the conflict signed numerous peace accords, including the Linas-Marcoussis Accord, but none resulted in sustained peace or reconciliation. In March 2007, after extensive negotiations mediated by Burkina Faso President Compaore between government and ex-rebel representatives, President Gbagbo and ex-rebel leader Guillaume Soro signed an agreement in Ouagadougou establishing a new transitional government with Soro as Prime Minister and a commitment to hold presidential elections in 2008.

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 affiliation was an important marker of political alliance. Many ethnic northerners, for example, were Muslim. As a result, the Government targeted many Muslims as suspected rebels and rebel sympathizers during the height of the crisis.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

Relations among the various religious groups were less strained than in the past; however, there continued to be some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of traditional indigenous beliefs. Strong efforts by religious and civil society groups helped prevent the political crisis from turning into a religious conflict.

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 engage 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 18,013,400. An estimated 35 to 40 percent of the country is Christian or syncretistic, practicing a mixture of Christian and indigenous religious beliefs. Approximately 35 percent of the population is Muslim, while an estimated 25 to 30 percent of the population practices traditional indigenous religious beliefs. Many persons who are nominally Christian or Muslim also practice some aspects of traditional indigenous religious beliefs, particularly as economic or political conditions worsened.

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

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

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

There has been an increase in the membership of evangelical churches. Missionary work, urbanization, immigration,

and higher education levels are believed to have contributed to a decline in the percentage of practitioners of traditional indigenous religious beliefs. Many of these practitioners continue to convert to Christianity and Islam.

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

Generally, the north is associated with Islam and the south with Christianity and other traditional religious groups. Both Catholics and Protestants reside in the southern and central regions. Additionally, Catholics are concentrated in the east, while Protestants reside in the southwest. Practitioners of traditional indigenous religious beliefs are concentrated in rural areas.

Political and religious affiliations tend to follow ethnic lines. For example, the Mande and Voltaic groups, which include the Malinke and Senufo people, are largely Muslim. The Akan ethnic group, which includes the Baoule and Agni people, tends to be Catholic. There is also some correlation between religion and political affiliations and socio-economic class. For example, most Muslims favor the opposition Rally of Republicans (RDR) party; additionally, the merchant class is mostly Muslim.

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

Missionaries are active in the country.

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 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 party, dominated by Muslims, boycotted the 2000 legislative elections. During the reporting period, Muslims represented 12 out of 32 ministers in the government led by former rebel leader Guillaume Soro.

In addition to the legislature, Muslims continued to be disproportionately underrepresented in media outlets, such as radio and television. Of the approximately 88 radio stations in the government-controlled zone, for example, there were 7 Catholic stations, 1 evangelical, and 1 Islamic.

Southerners, few of whom were Muslim, dominated the armed forces. The military offers Christian members access to chaplains and Muslim members 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. During the reporting period, the military designated three Muslim military auxiliary chaplains: one for the gendarmerie, one for the police, and another for the navy.

The Government observes major Islamic and Christian religious holidays. The recognized Islamic 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.

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 Interior's Department of Faith-Based Organizations. The Ministry of Interior investigates through the police the backgrounds of the founding members to ensure that the group has no politically subversive members or purpose. No religious group complained of arbitrary registration procedures or problems with gaining government recognition. The Ministry of Interior did not reject any registration requests during the reporting period. Traditional indigenous religious groups were less formally organized, and none applied for registration or recognition. 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. The Government did not favor any particular religion 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 the Government arbitrarily denied such registration to foreign missionaries.

The Government recognizes and oversees all schools, regardless of religion. All schools must meet certain nationally established curriculum requirements. Schools operated by religious groups were free to teach and regulate their own religion courses.

The Government permits religious instruction in public schools; established Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant student groups, including evangelical churches, usually offer this instruction outside of normal class hours.

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. The Government subsidizes private secondary schools, including those run by Christian and Muslim groups, although arrears have been accumulating for several years. In August 2006 the Minister of Health announced that students attending Muslim schools, even those that have not been recognized by the Government, would have access to health care (inoculation campaigns, vitamin distribution, etc.) provided to students in government schools. The Higher Council of Imams estimated that this new policy would benefit 96,000 students.

The Government began recognizing Muslim schools as official schools in 2006. During the reporting period, the Islamic National Council began constructing five new primary schools (two in Abidjan and three outside the Abidjan metro area) with the financial assistance of the Islamic Development Bank.

Unlike in previous reporting periods, the Government gave money to religious associations other than schools during the reporting period (about \$20,000 or 10 million FCFA) to cover the cost of completing the construction of religious sites or to go on religious pilgrimages. 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 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.

The Government continued to respond to the needs of various religious constituencies as a way of building political stability. 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. In March 2007 the President met several times with Muslim leaders about completion of the Plateau Mosque, land disputes, and the 2007 pilgrimage to Mecca. At that meeting, President Gbagbo announced that he would give one million dollars (500 million FCFA) to finish the Plateau Mosque. The President ordered construction work on the esplanade of the mosque to be quickly completed, providing needed worship space before the whole project is completed; however, no work was finished by the end of this reporting period.

In May 2007 President Gbagbo and Prime Minister Soro met separately with a delegation of imams led by Sheikh Aboubacar Fofana, the Chairman of the Higher Council of Imams (COSIM). The delegation made several requests, but the Government took no action on the requests during the reporting period. The President also met with Christian groups. In March 2007 he met with a delegation from the United Methodist Church of Texas to discuss cooperation between Ivorian and American Methodist churches. In March 2007 the President met with Catholic leaders to discuss the burglaries of 30 churches and seminaries. In response, the President dispatched security and defense forces to patrol churches in the most remote areas and promised to provide police protection for the property of other religious groups.

As with Muslim and Christian groups, President Gbagbo continued to meet frequently with traditional chiefs to listen to their concerns; however, such meetings were unsuccessful in bridging the deep political and ethnic divisions or promoting greater religious harmony.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Unlike in previous reporting periods, 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. Because they were often perceived as being rebel sympathizers, many Muslims and Northerners felt they were targets of discrimination by Southerners and the President's party. The perception of discrimination amongst Muslims lessened with the creation of the power sharing Government of National Reconciliation in 2003, the appointment of Prime Minister Soro in March 2007, 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 certificates that document their citizenship and are required for voting. When applying for passports, northern citizens complained that government officials required more documents from them than their southern, predominantly non-Muslim, counterparts. Additionally, there were reports that police officers continued to confiscate identity cards belonging to northern citizens or asked them to pay bribes at routine road checks before they would return the confiscated identity cards. More equitable issuance of identification certificates was a key demand in the peace process, and former Prime Minister Banny and current Prime Minister Soro made the implementation of a national identification process a top priority. However, this new process had barely begun by the end of the period covered by this report.

Some Muslim organizations view the Government's organizational requirements for Hajj trips to Saudi Arabia as unnecessary and unwarranted interference in religious affairs. For example, the Government required a minimum of 100 pilgrims per group, whereas the Saudi Government only requires 50 pilgrims per incoming group. The Government also required any group seeking to organize Hajj pilgrims to have been in existence for 3 to 4 years.

In December 2006 many Ivoirians were not able to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca because no plane was available. The Muslim community asked for the Government's assistance so that those who paid for the 2006 trip would be able to go in December 2007 without repaying and asked for a special government office to be created that would be solely responsible for organizing the Hajj.

Members of the largely Christian and Muslim urban elite that heavily influence the state often relegated practitioners of traditional indigenous religious beliefs to a lower social status than Christians and Muslims by excluding them from political decision-making. However, government officials often invited traditional chiefs 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

Unlike in past reporting periods, there were no reports of mosques destroyed. 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 religious community, in order to allow a private citizen to build a supermarket.

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.

Government officials, acting on their own volition, often discriminated against Northerners by confiscating travel and identity documents at checkpoints. Many officials and other societal actors presumed that Northerners were Muslim and supported rebel activity in the north.

Some Christians and Muslims refused to associate with practitioners of traditional indigenous religious beliefs. Many Christian and Muslim leaders disparaged practitioners of traditional indigenous religious beliefs as "pagans" or practitioners of "black magic." Despite these hostile attitudes towards indigenous religious groups, many of their practitioners were unaware of or did not consider themselves victims of societal discrimination, nor did they complain about their treatment.

During the reporting period, some Catholic priests complained of hostility from the growing numbers of evangelical Christian ministers, who recruit many of their members from the Catholic Church.

A few interfaith activities were organized during the period covered by the report. In May 2007 Muslim and Catholic leaders delivered key speeches at a conference on peace and reconciliation organized by the Islamic International Foundation, an Ivoirian nongovernmental organization (NGO). During the last quarter of 2006, the Ivoirian Human Rights Movement (MIDH) organized a conference and a debate on the theme "Religion and Non-Violence" that

featured an imam and an evangelical minister as speakers. In May 2006 delegates of the Forum of Religious Confessions of Cote d'Ivoire and of the Interfaith Council of West Africa (CIRAO) met in Abidjan at the behest of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, with participants from Ghana, Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and the United States. The theme of the meeting was peaceful coexistence between the religious groups. However, these interfaith initiatives have included few if any leaders of traditional indigenous religious groups.

The Forum of Religious Confessions (The Forum) is an interfaith organization that promotes dialogue, understanding, and improved relationships among religious leaders and groups, engaging 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. The Forum collaborated regularly with the Collective of Religious Confessions for National Reconciliation and Peace, an organization created with the support of the Department of Religion within the Ministry of Interior and the American Cultural Center. The Collective of Religious Confessions for National Reconciliation and Peace includes all the religious groups in the country, including various evangelical churches that previously refused to join The Forum. Discussions were ongoing to combine the two organizations.

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, the U.S. Embassy assisted efforts by the Government and NGOs to mitigate religious tensions in the country. The U.S. Ambassador and other U.S. Government officials regularly met with religious leaders.

On March 8, 2007, the Embassy hosted a conference to explore perceptions and realities of Muslim women and their place in Islam with one hundred Muslim and Christian NGO activists and community leaders. Panelists discussed women's rights from a religious point of view and how traditional and secular customs are often intertwined with religious doctrine to reduce the status of women.

In February 2007 the Embassy hosted a roundtable on interfaith marriage with a mixed Muslim and Christian audience in Yamoussoukro. A Jewish-Catholic American couple shared their strategies for resolving issues of faith and family in a mixed-faith marriage.

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

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90093.htm)