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Cote d'Ivoire



International Religious Freedom Report

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
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The new Constitution, which was approved by referendum in July 2000 and implemented on August 4, 2000, provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government at times limited this right in practice.

The status of respect for religious freedom deteriorated somewhat during the period covered by this report. In October and December 2000, violent clashes between security forces, Republican Rally (RDR) militants, and Ivoirian Popular Front (FPI) supporters, led to the deaths of hundreds of persons, most of whom were Muslims. During the period covered by this report, the security forces detained, questioned, and, on at least one occasion, beat Muslims. The Government monitors minority religions for signs of political activity it considers subversive or dangerous. Some Muslims believe that their religious and ethnic affiliation make them targets of discrimination by the Government with regard to both employment and the renewal of national identity cards.

Relations between the various religious communities generally are amicable; however, there is some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of traditional indigenous religions.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total land area of 122,780 square miles, and its population is 15,366,692. The published results of the most recent national census, conducted in 1998, indicated that Muslims make up about 38.6 percent of the country's population; Catholics make up 19.4 percent; practitioners of traditional indigenous religions, 11.9 percent; Protestants, 6.6 percent; Harrists, 1.3 percent; other Christians, 3.1 percent; practitioners of other religions, 1.7 percent; and persons without religious preference or affiliation, 16.7 percent. Among citizens, 27.4 percent are Muslim, 20.8 percent are Catholic, 15.4 percent practice traditional indigenous religions, 8.2 percent are Protestant, 1.6 percent are Harrist, 3.4 percent are of other Christian affiliations, 1.9 percent practice other religions, and 20.7 percent are without religious affiliation. Foreigners living in the country are 70.5 percent Muslim and 15.4 percent Catholic with small percentages practicing other religions.

Muslims are found in the greatest numbers in the northern half of the country, though they also are becoming increasingly numerous in the cities of the south due to immigration. In 1998 Muslims composed 45.5 percent of the total urban population and 33.5 percent of the total rural population. Catholics are found mostly in the southern, central, and eastern portions of the country. Practitioners of traditional indigenous religions are concentrated in rural areas of the country's north, west, center, and east. Protestants are concentrated in the central, eastern, and southwest regions. Members of the Harrist Church, an African Protestant denomination founded in the country in 1913 by a Liberian preacher named William Wade Harris, are concentrated in the south.

Political and religious affiliations tend to follow ethnic lines. As population growth and movement have accentuated ethnic distinctions between the groups of the Sahel and those of the forest zone, those distinctions have been expressed sometimes in terms of religion (e.g., northern Muslims and southern Christians and traditionalists).

Religious groups in the country include the Adventist Church, the Assemblies of God, the Southern Baptist Church, Bossonism (the traditional religious practices of the Akan ethnic group), the Autonomous Church of Celestial Christianity of Oschoffa, Islam, Roman Catholicism, the Union of the Evangelical Church of Services and Works of Cote d'Ivoire, the Harrist Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), the Protestant Methodist Church of Cote d'Ivoire, the Yoruba First Church, the Church of God

International Missions, the Baptist Church Missions, the Church of the Prophet Papa Nouveau (a syncretistic religion founded in the country in 1937, which combines Christian doctrine, traditional indigenous rituals, and practical concern for social, political, and economic progress for Africans), the Pentecostal Church of Cote d'Ivoire, the Messianic Church, the Limoudim of Rabbi Jesus (a small Christian group, the origins of which are unknown), the Unification Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Interdenominational Church, the Eckankar religion (a syncretistic religion founded in 1965 in Nigeria that sees human passion as an obstacle to uniting a person's divine qualities), and Buddhism. Many religious groups in the country are associated with American religious groups.

Most of the country's many syncretistic religions are forms of Christianity that contain some traditional indigenous practices and rituals. Many of these have been founded by Ivoirian or other African prophets and are organized around and dependent upon the founder's personality. Some emphasize faith healing or the sale of sacred objects imbued with supernatural powers to bring health and good luck. Many nominal Christians and Muslims practice some aspects of traditional indigenous religions, especially in difficult times.

Generally, there has been a trend towards conversion by practitioners of traditional religions to Christianity and Islam. Missionary work, urbanization, immigration, and higher education levels have led to a decline in the percentage of practitioners of traditional religion from 37 percent in 1975 to 11.9 percent in 1998.

Immigrants from other parts of Africa generally are at least nominally Muslim or Christian. The majority of foreign missionaries are European or American representatives of established religions, but some Nigerians and Congolese also have set up churches.

In the past, Catholic priests tended to be better educated than leaders of other religions. Numerous Catholic schools were founded in the country in the early 1900's, during French colonial rule, and citizens who attended these schools generally received good educations and came to make up a disproportionately large part of the country's elites. Many senior government officials, including all three heads of state since independence, have been Catholics. The Baoule ethnic minority, which has dominated the State and the ruling Democratic Party of Cote d'Ivoire (PDCI) from independence in 1960 until 1999, largely is Catholic, although some Baoules continue to practice traditional indigenous religion and a few practice Islam.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution that was suspended following the December 24, 1999, coup d'etat provided for freedom of religion, and the previous Government generally respected this right. The new Constitution, implemented on August 4, 2000, also provides for freedom of religion; however, the new Government that came into power following the October 22, 2000, presidential election at times restricted this right in practice. There is no state religion, but for historical and ethnic reasons the Government informally favors Christianity, particularly the Roman Catholic Church.

In past years, the Government has paid for the construction of Catholic cathedrals; however, the Government also sponsors or finances the construction of shrines for groups other than the Catholic Church. During the period covered by this report, the Government was directing the construction of the Plateau Mosque in central Abidjan and financing it with the help of governments or government-affiliated religious organizations of some largely Islamic Arab countries.

The Government establishes requirements for religious groups under a 1939 French law. All religious groups wishing to operate in the country must submit to the Ministry of the Interior a file including the group's bylaws, the names of the founding members, the date of founding (or date on which the founder received the revelation of his or her calling), the minutes of the general assembly, the names of members of the administrative board, and other information. The Interior Ministry investigates the backgrounds of the founding members to ascertain that the group has no politically subversive purpose. However, in practice the Government's regulation of religious groups generally has not been unduly restrictive since 1990, when the Government legalized opposition political parties.

Although nontraditional religious groups, like all public secular associations, are required to register with the Government, no penalties are imposed on a group that fails to register. In practice registration can bring advantages of public recognition, invitation to official ceremonies and events, publicity, gifts, and school subsidies. No religious group has complained of arbitrary registration procedures or recognition; however, the Government does not register traditional indigenous religious groups.

The Government grants no tax or other benefits to religious groups; however, some religious groups have gained some favors after individual negotiations. Examples include reductions in the cost of resident alien registration, customs exemptions on certain religious items, and, in some cases, privileges similar to those of diplomats. No particular religion is favored consistently in this manner. Occasionally a state-owned company grants favors to religious leaders, such as a reduction in airplane fare.

Foreign missionaries must meet the same requirements as any foreigner, including resident alien registration and identification card requirements. However, there were no reports that foreign missionaries were denied such registration arbitrarily.

Religious instruction is permitted in public schools and usually offered after normal class hours. Such instruction is offered by established Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant groups.

In 1999 Roman Catholic Church groups began to operate four community radio stations: Radio Espoir in Abidjan, Radio Paix Sanwi in Aboisso, Radio Notre Dame in Yamoussoukro, and Radio Dix-Huit Montagnes in Man. Although the Muslim associations received a broadcast license in 1999, no Muslim station had begun broadcasting by the end of the period covered by this report. Catholics, Muslims, and Protestants have had their own religious programs on national television and radio for over 20 years. On significant Christian and Islamic holy days, national television often broadcasts films on the lives of the founders of those religions.

The Government has taken some positive steps to promote interfaith understanding. Government officials, including the President and his religious advisers, make a point of appearing at major religious celebrations and events organized by a wide variety of faiths and groups. There is no government-sponsored forum for interfaith dialog, but the Government often invites leaders of various religious communities (but not of traditional indigenous religious groups) to attend official ceremonies and to sit on deliberative and advisory committees, including the Mediation Committee for National Reconciliation.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government monitors minority religions, to the extent of registering them, but does not control them closely; however, the proliferation of new groups has caused some concern among Government officials and citizens. In his 1999 New Year's greetings, then-President Henri Konan Bedie advised the public to be wary of new groups that are not identified clearly and warned such groups against taking advantage of the country's tradition of tolerance to commit acts of fraud or manipulation. The Government closely watches some religious groups, including Islamic associations and minority groups for signs of political activity that it considers subversive.

In March 1999 and April 2001, local governments closed some Harrist churches, particularly in Bingerville and Grand Labou, to prevent an escalation of intrareligious violence (see Section III). Most of the churches were reopened by January 2001, following government mediation and the restoration of unity within the Harrist church. Almost all of the remaining churches were reopened by the end of the period covered by this report.

Police and gendarmes searched 17 mosques for arms prior to the October 22, 2000, presidential election. On August 27, 2000, approximately 25 gendarmes searched a mosque for arms that they suspected the Muslim community was hiding for the RDR. The mosque, which is located in Abidjan's Riviera 2 neighborhood, is headed by one of the leaders of the National Islamic Council (CNI), Imam Sekou Sylla. Gendarmes also mistakenly searched the house of one of the imam's neighbors. The gendarmes did not have warrants to conduct these searches.

The Government informally favors the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic Church leaders had a much stronger voice in government affairs than their Islamic counterparts, which led to feelings of disenfranchisement among the Muslim population. After assuming power following the coup, General Robert Guei indicated that one of the goals of the transition government was to end this favoritism and put all of the major religious faiths on an equal footing. However, in practice General Guei did not take any steps to bring this about, nor has his successor, President Laurent Gbagbo.

Some Muslims believe that their religious or ethnic affiliation makes them targets of discrimination by the Government with regard to both employment and the renewal of national identity cards. Due to the tense political situation in the country and the ethnic divisions along which political party lines are drawn, northern Muslims sometimes are scrutinized more closely in the identity card application process. As these northern Muslims share names, style of dress, and customs with several of the country's predominantly Muslim neighboring countries, they sometimes are accused wrongly of attempting to obtain nationality cards illegally in order to vote or otherwise take advantage of citizenship.

Muslims often have had to struggle for state benefits that came more easily to practitioners of other religions. For example, Catholic and Protestant schools are regarded as official schools supervised by the Ministry of Education and subsidized by the Government. However, until 1994 Islamic schools were regarded as religious schools, were supervised by the Ministry of the Interior, and were unsubsidized even if they followed official school curriculums. Since 1994 Islamic schools that follow official curriculums have been subsidized by the Government. The Government recognized no Muslim religious holidays until 1974 and did not recognize all major Muslim religious holidays until 1994. Churches always have had organized Christian pilgrimages without formal government supervision, but until 1993 the Ministry of the Interior supervised Islamic pilgrimages to Mecca (the Hajj).

In May and June 2000, during his travels to various regions of the country, General Guei continually asked imams and other Muslim leaders to stay out of politics. The new Constitution and eligibility requirements for presidential candidates were being debated at the time, and the military government warned Muslim imams to refrain from political discourse in their sermons. The military Government suspected the imams of supporting coreligionist RDR president Alassane Dramane Ouattara, whose eligibility was at the center of the debates and whom General Guei did not want to have run for president. The Government claimed that the imams had been jeopardizing security with sermons that were too politically charged.

Other government officials also made public statements criticizing Muslim leaders. For example, on November 30, 2000, Minister of the Interior Emile Boga Doudou accused CNI President El Hadj Idriss Kone Koudouss of accepting \$50,000 (35 million FCFA) to plan and organize disturbances following the pending disqualification of Alassane Ouattara's candidacy. Boga Doudou also suggested that imam Koudouss was a member of the RDR. On December 5, 2000, Boga Doudou displayed firearms on national television, which he said the armed forces had seized in a mosque.

Traditional indigenous religions, which are not registered officially as religions, rarely are included in official or unofficial lists of the country's religions. There is no generally accepted system for classifying the country's diverse traditional religious practices, which vary not only by ethnic group, but also by region, village, and family, as well as by gender and age group. In addition, members of the country's largely Christianized or Islamicized urban elites, which effectively control the State, generally seem disinclined to accord to traditional indigenous religions the social status accorded to Christianity and Islam. No traditional indigenous religious leader (except for traditional rulers, who also may perform some traditional religious functions) is known to have been invited to present New Year's greetings to the President or to take part in a government advisory council. However, traditional Akan chiefs very often are invited to pour alcohol on the ground at the beginning of important ceremonies, even the most official ones, in order to bless the events.

The Government does not prohibit links to foreign coreligionists but informally discourages connections with politically radical fundamentalist movements, such as Islamic groups based in Iran and Libya.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Street demonstrations erupted following the October 22, 2000, presidential elections. Violent clashes among security forces, RDR militants, and militants from the FPI resulted in the deaths of more than 200 persons in Youpougon, a majority whom were identified as Muslims and RDR supporters. The Government, as well as several international and national human rights organizations, conducted investigations and published exhaustive reports on the killings. According to such reports, the gendarmes from Abobo Gendarme Camp most likely were responsible for the Youpougon killings. During the violence, several churches and mosques were damaged or destroyed, along with religious texts and sacred objects. Eighteen mosques were burned and 18 others were damaged throughout the country. Eight churches were damaged or burned, and several documents and vehicles were destroyed.

Following the November 30, 2000, Supreme Court decision to disqualify Alassane Ouattara from the legislative elections, thousands of RDR supporters protested the decision. According to the Government, approximately 13 persons were killed in violent clashes with the military and gendarmes; the RDR estimated that 30 persons were killed. The Ivorian Movement for Human Rights reported that 37 persons had been killed, most of whom were shot, and that several hundred persons had been injured. Gendarmes killed a 60-year-old Guinean man in front of his family as he was preparing for Muslim prayers on December 4, 2000; he was shot reportedly because he was wearing a Moslem robe, which the gendarmes believed marked him as a supporter of the RDR. In addition to the killings, security forces and rival political groups allegedly damaged or destroyed four mosques and four churches. Furthermore, following the RDR's December 4, 2000, demonstration, security forces arrested imams and approximately 200 Muslim worshippers in several mosques in the Abidjan's Abobo district. Security forces beat imam Bakary and others, stripped them of their clothes, and detained them for several days in Abidjan's police and gendarme camps. The Minister of State for Interior and Decentralization publicly accused the imams of hiding arms in their mosques. The Government released the imams and their worshippers by the end of 2000, following mediation by the Mediation Committee on National Reconciliation.

Citing the killings of hundreds of Muslims during the October and December 2000 demonstrations, CNI President Koudouss accused the authorities and the armed forces of having planned a genocide, adding that Muslims would not feel "reconciled" until the Government apologized to the Muslim community. The Government had not responded by the end of the period covered by this report.

On December 5, 2000, after youths set fire to a mosque in Abidjan's Abobo district, the anti-riot brigade used tear gas against and beat Muslims who had gathered to inspect the damage. When Imam Bassama Sylla attempted to intervene, the police stripped him and detained him. Police also entered at least two other mosques in Abobo and detained persons inside.

In addition to searching the homes of Islamic leaders, security forces also summoned Islamic leaders for

questioning on several occasions based on suspicions that they were plotting civil unrest with the RDR.

On July 21, 2000, the military government briefly detained and questioned CNI President El Hadj Idriss Kone Koudouss for encouraging Muslims to vote against the new Constitution, which he argued reinforces the concept of "Ivoirity," a doctrine that discriminates against Ivoirians of mixed or foreign origins. Imam Koudouss also claimed that harassment of Muslims has increased since former President Bedie introduced "Ivoirity" in 1994. The CNSP noted that sermons such as Koudouss's could be considered inciting violence and rebellion. Koudouss was released after the warning.

On August 24, 2000, the gendarmes detained and questioned El Hadj Koudouss, four other prominent imams from the CNI, and one Islamic youth leader. The Government accused them of procuring arms, in cooperation with RDR presidential candidate Ouattara, in order to destabilize the country. The gendarmes released all six after questioning. According to the imams, this was the fifth time that leaders of the CNI had been called in for questioning since the coup. Muslims say that such acts by the Government are an attempt to make the Muslim community a "scapegoat" for the country's problems.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

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 Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations among the various religious communities generally are amicable; however, there is some societal discrimination against Muslims and followers of traditional indigenous religions.

The country's Islamic communities are subject to a great deal of societal discrimination. Some non-Muslims have objected to the construction of mosques, such as the new mosque in Abidjan's Plateau district, because the Islamic duty to give alms daily may attract beggars to neighborhoods containing mosques. Some non-Muslims also object to having to hear the muezzins' calls to prayer. Some persons consider all Muslims as foreigners or fundamentalists. Muslim citizens often are treated as foreigners by their fellow citizens, including by government officials, because most Muslims are members of northern ethnic groups that also are found in other African countries from which there has been substantial immigration into the country. Muslims also frequently were discriminated against because of ethnic origin or presumed support of Ouattara's candidacy. Many Muslims are northerners and tended to support the presidential candidacy of Ouattara.

Followers of traditional indigenous religions also are subject to societal discrimination. Many leaders of nontraditional religions, such as Christianity or Islam, look down on practitioners of traditional indigenous religions as pagans, practitioners of black magic or human sacrifice. Some Christians or Muslims refuse to associate with practitioners of traditional indigenous religions. The practices of traditional indigenous religions often are shrouded by secrecy and include exclusive initiation rites, oaths of silence, and taboos against writing down orally transmitted history. However, there have been no reports of human sacrifice in the country since well before independence. Although the purported practice of black magic or witchcraft continues to be feared widely, it generally is discouraged by traditional indigenous religions, aspects of which commonly purport to offer protection from witchcraft. Traditional indigenous religions commonly involve belief in one supreme deity as well as lesser deities or spirits that are to be praised or appeased, some of whom may in some religions be believed to inhabit or otherwise be associated with particular places, natural objects, or man-made images. However, many practitioners of traditional indigenous religions are unaware of societal discrimination and have not complained.

Conflicts between and within religious groups have surfaced occasionally. In the past, members of the Limoudim of Rabbi Jesus, a small Christian group of unknown origin, have criticized and sometimes attacked other Christian groups for allegedly failing to follow the teachings of Jesus; however, there were no reports of such attacks during the period covered by this report.

The Celestial Christians are divided because of a leadership struggle, as are the Harrists who have resorted to violence on occasion to resolve their differences. In March 2000, during the internal struggle in the Harrist Church, clergy leader Barthelemy Akre Yasse struck Harrist National Committee president Tchotche Mel Felix from the church rolls for insubordination. This battle for church leadership at the national level led to violent confrontations between church members at the local level. In March and April 2000, local governments closed Harrist churches in which the confrontations took place in order to prevent an escalation in the violence (see Section II). Most of the churches were reopened by January 2001 after the restoration of unity within the Harrist church. In January 2001, church members from all throughout the country gathered at the Harrist church in Bingerville, one of the churches that had been closed, to celebrate their restored unity.

There are several examples of interfaith cooperation. Once a year, on New Year's Eve, members of all Christian religious groups gather in the National Stadium in Abidjan to keep a nightlong vigil and pray. When serious social problems have arisen, simultaneous Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim prayer ceremonies have been held in churches, temples, and mosques to ask for divine assistance. Kouassi-Datekro, a town in the Akan region in the eastern part of the country, is famous for ecumenical events involving simultaneous prayer services of all faiths. Since 1990 religious leaders from diverse groups have assembled on their own initiative to mediate in times of political conflict; however, no leaders of traditional indigenous religious groups have been included. On January 25, 2001, the Catholic Archbishop of Abidjan Bernard Agre and other religious leaders attended the funeral of Tidiane Ba, the imam of one of the largest mosques. When the Pope elevated Archbishop Agre to the rank of Cardinal on March 11, 2001, leaders of the Islamic, Protestant, and syncretistic religious groups attended the Cardinal's Mass of Thanksgiving.

In September 1997, the Research Group in Democracy and Social and Economic Development of Cote d'Ivoire (GERDDES-CI), a democracy and civic education group, created the Forum of Religious Confessions. The Forum includes the leaders of many of the country's religious faiths, including Catholics, Muslims, various Protestants groups, several syncretist groups, the Association of Traditional Priests, and the "Bossonists," an association of indigenous Akan religious priests. The Forum is headed by the leader of the Celestial Christian Church, and its objective is to promote dialog, increase understanding, and improve religious leaders' and groups' relationships. The Forum also mediates in times of serious social or political conflicts, as it did in 2000 and 2001 during violent conflict among rival political and student groups (see Section II).

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy has monitored and reported on the status of religious freedom, developed and maintained contacts with leaders of diverse religious groups, and discussed religious freedom issues with government officials in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

In 1997 with financial assistance from the Embassy, GERDDES-CI helped religious groups in the country establish a Forum of Religious Confessions, which included all of the main religious groups (see Section III). The Forum continued to meet during the period covered by this report.

[End]

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