



Benin

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

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.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total land area of 43,483 square miles, and its population is approximately 6.4 million. Reliable statistics on religious affiliation are not available; however, according to most estimates, approximately 30 percent of the population nominally is Christian, and approximately 20 percent nominally is Muslim. The remaining 50 percent of the population adheres to one form or another of traditional indigenous religions. Many persons who nominally identify themselves as Christian or Muslim also practice traditional indigenous religions. Among the most commonly practiced traditional indigenous religions is the animist "Vodun" system of belief, also commonly known as voodoo, which originated in this area of Africa. Almost all citizens appear to be believers of a supernatural order. There are virtually no atheists.

More than half of all Christians are Roman Catholics. Other groups include members of the Baptist, Methodist, Assembly of God, Pentecostal, the Church of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Celestial Christians, Rosicrucian, the Unification Church, Eckankar, Seventh-day Adventists and the Baha'i Faith. Nearly all Muslims adhere to the Sunni branch of Islam. The few Shi'a Muslims are primarily Middle Eastern expatriates.

There are Christians, Muslims, and adherents of traditional indigenous religions throughout the country. However, most adherents of the traditional Yoruba religion are in the south, while other traditional indigenous faiths are followed in the north. Muslims are represented most heavily in the north and in the southeast. Christians are prevalent in the south, particularly in Cotonou, the economic capital. It is not unusual for members of the same family to practice Christianity, Islam, traditional indigenous religions, or a combination of all of these faiths.

Missionary groups operate freely throughout the country.

Foreign missionary groups presently known to be operating in the country include the Watchtower Society, Mormons, Assemblies of God, Mennonites, Church of the Nazarene, Adventists, Society in Mission, and Baptists.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. There is no state-sponsored religion.

The Constitutional Court has ruled in several cases that it is unconstitutional to block the access of any group to its religious services.

In February 2003, the Constitutional Court upheld a Defense Ministry decision allowing its gendarmes to intervene in conflicts between religious groups only as a neutral peacekeeping force. Any intervention was required to be neutral to comply with the principle of state neutrality in the management of religious affairs while ensuring public order and social peace.

In October 2003, the Constitutional Court ruled that simple discussions on religion, even when they turn into mockeries, cannot be analyzed as a violation of religious freedom because of the right of free speech.

Persons who wish to form a religious group must register with the Ministry of the Interior. Registration requirements are the same for all religious groups, and there were no reports that any group had been refused permission to register or had been subjected to unusual delays or obstacles in the registration process. Religious groups are free from taxation. Government officials accord respect to prominent religious leaders of all faiths by attending their induction ceremonies, funerals, and other religious celebrations. The President regularly received religious leaders of all faiths, and police forces are assigned to provide security to any religious event upon request.

The Constitution provides for a secular state; consequently, public schools are not authorized to provide religious instruction.

National holidays include Christian, Islamic, and traditional religious commemorations. One indigenous, three Muslim, and six Christian religious holidays are officially observed: Ramadan, Tabaski, Maouloud, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Whit Monday, Assumption Day, All Saints Day, Christmas, and Traditional Religions holiday. State-run television features coverage of the celebration of religious holidays and special events in the lives of prominent religious leaders, including ordination anniversaries and funerals.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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 refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Due

possibly to the diversity of religious affiliations within families and communities, religious tolerance was widespread at all levels of society and in all geographic regions. Interfaith dialogue occurred regularly, and citizens respected different religious traditions and practices, including syncretistic beliefs. Many Vodun followers are also Christian and Muslim; therefore they are tolerant of other religions.

Ecumenical Day has been celebrated on the first Wednesday of May for the past 36 years, and traditionally it includes a large celebration of inter-religious cooperation in the historic town of Ouidah. Individual religious leaders attempt to bridge the divide between Christians and Muslims and preach a message of tolerance.

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. The Ambassador and other Embassy representatives regularly attend ceremonies associated with various faiths, often attended by Government representatives as well, and stress in their public remarks the value and importance of interfaith dialogue and cooperation. These events include Iftars during Ramadan, Vodun ceremonies, and evangelical and Catholic sponsored events.

Released on September 15, 2004

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