



## Benin

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

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

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 43,483 square miles and a population of 8.3 million. According to the 2002 census, 27 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 24 percent Muslim, 17 percent practitioners of Voodoo (also known as Vodun), 6 percent adherents of other traditional indigenous beliefs, and 5 percent Celestial Christians. Groups with less than 5 percent each include Methodists, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Rosicrucians, the Unification Church, Eckankar, Baha'is, Baptists, Assemblies of God, and Pentecostals. Seven percent claim no religious affiliation.

Many individuals who identify themselves as Christian or Muslim also practice Voodoo or other traditional local religions.

Nearly all Muslims are Sunni. The few Shi'a Muslims are primarily Middle Eastern expatriates.

There are Christians, Muslims, and adherents of traditional local religious groups throughout the country. However, Muslims are represented most heavily in the north and southeast, while Christians are prevalent in the south, particularly in Cotonou.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Constitutional Court determines the legal guidelines that govern religious practice. In recent years the court determined that it is illegal to block the access of any group to its religious services and that criticism of religious belief is a protected free speech right. In January 2008 the Constitutional Court ruled that the destruction of an evangelical church by members of a local traditional brotherhood called Oro and the scornful statements about the Oro brotherhood by the church's pastor violated the constitutional principles of interfaith

dialogue, respect, and tolerance.

The Ministry of National Defense is permitted to intervene in conflicts between religious groups as a peacekeeping force to ensure public order and social peace, provided that the intervention complies with the principle of state neutrality in the management of religious affairs.

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 was refused permission to register or subjected to unusual delays or obstacles in the registration process. Religious groups are free from taxation.

Government officials accorded respect to prominent leaders of all religious groups by attending their induction ceremonies, funerals, and other religious celebrations. The President regularly received leaders of all religious groups, and police forces were assigned to provide security to any religious event upon request.

In accordance with Article 2 of the Constitution, which provides for a secular state, public schools are not authorized to provide religious instruction. Religious groups are permitted to establish private schools.

National holidays include Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Whit Monday, Assumption Day, All Saints' Day, Christmas, Ramadan, Tabaski, and the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and one holiday for traditional indigenous religions. State-operated television featured coverage of the celebration of religious holidays and special events in the lives of prominent religious leaders, including ordination anniversaries and funerals. Ecumenical Day is celebrated every first Wednesday of May and traditionally includes a large celebration of interreligious cooperation in the historic town of Ouidah. Religious leaders make an effort to bridge the divide between Christians and Muslims and preach a message of tolerance.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by the report.

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

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Due to the diversity of religious affiliations within families and communities, respect for religious differences was widespread at all levels of society and in all regions. However, there were occasional conflicts between Voodoo practitioners and Christians over Voodoo initiation practices which required the intervention of local security forces.

Interfaith dialogue occurred regularly, although there was no formal body or mechanism to promote interfaith dialogue.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

human rights. Embassy officials met with Christian, Muslim, and Voodoo leaders to discuss issues pertaining to interfaith dialogue and to the Government's respect for religious freedom.

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