

COTE D'IVOIRE 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and worship, consistent with law and order, and prohibits religious discrimination in employment. It emphasizes that religious tolerance is fundamental to the nation's unity, national reconciliation, and social cohesion. It forbids speech that encourages religious hatred. In July authorities charged a Muslim preacher with xenophobia, discrimination, inciting hatred, and being sympathetic toward terrorism. As in previous years, the government organized and supervised Hajj pilgrimages for Muslims and funded pilgrimages to Europe and Israel for Christians. In August authorities in Abidjan arrested evangelical Christian Pastor Israel N'Goran for publishing online videos authorities deemed "tribalistic and xenophobic."

In March, during a speech on the last day of the United Methodist Church of Cote d'Ivoire's annual conference, a Methodist bishop called on the president to encourage individuals who left the country following the disputed national election in 2010 to return and also to release political prisoners. In October Muslim and Catholic leaders participated in the sixth Interreligious Conference for Peace hosted by the Sant'Egidio community.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed the importance of religious tolerance with government officials, the political opposition, and the national media. In January the embassy hosted a discussion on nonviolent resistance and religious tolerance. In March the Charge d'Affaires led an embassy delegation in a cycling event entitled "Pedaling for Peace" to commemorate the second anniversary of a 2016 attack in Grand Bassam that left 22 persons dead, including the three attackers. The embassy organized a social cohesion program for youth using soccer as a means for teaching tolerance and respect for diversity. The program specifically focused on the need for tolerance in a religiously diverse country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 26.3 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the most recent census (in 2014), 42 percent are Muslim, 34 percent are Christian, and 4 percent are adherents of indigenous religious beliefs. Approximately 20 percent of the population did not respond to the census.

Many Christians and Muslims also practice some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs.

Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Harrists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Southern Baptists, Greek Orthodox, Copts, members of the Celestial Church of Christ, and members of the Assemblies of God. Muslim groups include Sunnis (95 percent of Muslims), Shia, Sufis, and Ahmadis. Other religious groups include Buddhists, Baha'is, Rastafarians, followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and Bossonists, who follow traditions of the Akan ethnic group.

Traditionally, the north of the country is associated with Islam and the south with Christianity, although members of both religious groups live throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates a secular state that respects all beliefs and treats all individuals equally under the law, regardless of religion. It prohibits religious discrimination in public and private employment and provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, and worship consistent with the law, the rights of others, national security, and public order. It prohibits "propaganda" that encourages religious hatred. It recognizes the right of political asylum in the country for individuals persecuted for religious reasons.

The Department of Faith-Based Organizations within the Ministry of Interior is charged with promoting dialogue among religious groups and between the government and religious groups, providing administrative support to groups trying to become established, monitoring religious activities, and managing state-sponsored religious pilgrimages and registration of new religious groups.

The law requires all religious groups to register with the government. Foreign religious groups with a presence in the country require authorization from the Department of Faith-Based Organizations, and local religious associations need to register their associations with the same department. Groups must submit an application to the Department of Faith-Based Organizations. The application must include the group's bylaws, names of the founding members and board members,

date of founding, and general assembly minutes. The department investigates the organization to ensure the religious group has no members or purpose deemed politically subversive and that no members are deprived of their civil and political rights. There are no penalties prescribed for groups that do not register, but those that register benefit from government support such as free access to state-run television and radio for religious programming to groups that request it. Registered religious groups are not charged import duties on devotional items such as religious books and rosaries.

Religious education is not included in the public school curriculum but is often included in private schools affiliated with a particular faith. Religious groups running the schools normally provide opt-out procedures. Religiously-affiliated schools are regulated in that teachers and supervisory staff must participate in training offered by the Ministry of National Education before the school receives accreditation from the Ministry. According to an official June survey from the Directorate for Strategy, Planning, and Statistics of the Ministry of National Education, only 244 out of 1409 of Islamic schools are authorized by the Ministry of National Education and follow the national curriculum, as well as the Islamic curriculum.

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

Government Practices

Local authorities in Abidjan arrested Imam Aguib Toure, a Muslim preacher, on July 4 for two videos he had published on a popular social media site. In the first one, he discouraged Muslim parents from enrolling their children in Christian schools. In the second video, he criticized the increase in the cost of the Hajj since President Alassane Ouattara took office in 2010, as well as evictions of destitute persons in Abidjan. He was charged on July 9 with xenophobia, discrimination, inciting hatred, and issuing an apology for terrorism. The Higher Council of Imams of Cote d'Ivoire (COSIM), the principal organization of imams in the country, requested a diligent investigation and fair trial on July 18. On August 6, the court granted the imam provisional release.

Authorities in Abidjan arrested evangelical preacher Israel N'Goran on August 1 while he was live on a social media site delivering what the authorities stated were xenophobic and tribalistic messages targeting the Dioula ethnic group and foreigners including Lebanese and Moroccans. N'Goran said he considered them

to be dangerous to society, and compared the Dioula to gangrene. He was released from detention after receiving amnesty from the president on August 6.

Minister of Defense Hamed Bakayoko, who is Muslim, attended a Catholic church service in an impoverished neighborhood of Abidjan where he was seeking an electoral seat during the campaign for municipal elections on September 30. He spoke about interreligious dialogue, his plan for the district, and his actions. A significant number of Catholics stated they did not believe the church was the proper location for electoral discourse. Archbishop of Abidjan Cardinal Jean Pierre Kutwa later apologized to the congregants.

The government continued to supervise and organize Hajj pilgrimages for Muslims and fund pilgrimages to Israel, Portugal, Spain, and France for Christians, as well as fund local pilgrimages for members of independent African Christian churches. The government organized and transported 6,800 pilgrims to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj compared to 4,200 the previous year and funded pilgrimages for 942 Christians to Europe and Israel. The government also assisted 2,155 Christians and adherents of traditional religions in their pilgrimages in the country and elsewhere in Africa.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

A bishop from the United Methodist Church during the Church's 13th Ordinary Annual Conference on March 18 called on the president to enable the repatriation of all citizens still in exile following disputed national elections in 2010 and to release all political prisoners. He said that political leaders should put the nation's interests and the people's wellbeing ahead of their own. On August 6, the president announced an amnesty for 800 persons linked to the post-electoral crisis, leading to the release of 300 individuals from detention.

Christian and Muslim religious leaders, civil society, and political leaders took part in the sixth Interreligious Conference for Peace hosted by the Sant'Egidio Community in Abidjan on October 21. Local religious leaders stated they agreed to work together to fight the causes of conflicts, one of which they labeled as religious fanaticism.

Individuals regularly celebrated each other's religious holidays by attending household or neighborhood gatherings, regardless of their own faith. For example, in August Minister of Urban Areas Albert Francois Amichia, who is Christian,

attended the Eid al-Adha celebration at the Treichville mosque with Muslim believers.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy representatives frequently discussed the importance of religious tolerance with government officials and the political opposition. The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials took multiple trips to Man, in the western part of the country, where they met with government leaders to discuss the 2016 closure of a prominent mosque, whose members had resorted to violence to resolve a question of leadership.

U.S. embassy representatives frequently discussed the importance of religious tolerance with the national media. In January the embassy hosted a discussion on nonviolent resistance and religious tolerance using Martin Luther King, Jr.’s autobiography as a reference. In March the Charge d’Affaires led an embassy delegation in a community cycling event entitled “Pedaling for Peace” to commemorate the second anniversary of a 2016 terrorist attack in Grand Bassam and underscoring the need for religious tolerance. Embassy officials regularly conducted outreach with leaders of faith communities with the aim of preventing radicalization and preserving peaceful relations between religious groups. During the trips to Man, the Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials also met with civil society and religious leaders to discuss the 2016 mosque closure.

The embassy organized a social cohesion program for youth using soccer as a means to teach youth about themes of tolerance, respect for diversity, and conflict resolution. The program specifically focused on the need for tolerance in a religiously diverse country.

Under an agreement between Voice of America (VOA) and the Islamic radio network Al-Bayane Radio, VOA’s *Dialogue des Religions (Dialogue of Religions)* in French continued to reach millions of listeners across the country with its weekly broadcast on Islamic radio stations. *Dialogue des Religions* featured a host and guests – often religious scholars or journalists – who discussed religious issues in the news and answered listeners’ questions on various facets of religion. The embassy also continued its *Hello, America!* broadcast, a monthly radio program in partnership with Al-Bayane, which has the largest audience in the country. The program featured Americans from the embassy who represented different ethnic and religious backgrounds and spoke about the value of diversity, including religious tolerance and diversity.