



Equatorial Guinea

International Religious Freedom Report 2002

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The law provides for freedom of religion; however, in practice the Government limited this right in some respects.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government discourages criticism by religious groups and restricts activities outside church premises.

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

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 10,831 square miles, and its population is approximately 474,200. The population is approximately 93 percent Christian, 5 percent practitioners of traditional indigenous religions, and less than 1 percent each Muslim, Baha'i, other religions, and those who are nonreligious. The principal religion is Roman Catholicism, dating from the Spanish colonial period, when almost the entire population was baptized into this faith. Of the Christian population, approximately 87 percent at least nominally are Catholic, and approximately 4.5 percent belong to Protestant denominations, primarily Baptist and Episcopalian. In practice the actual number of practitioners of traditional indigenous religions is much higher, although the exact figure is unknown. Many baptized Catholics reportedly still follow traditional beliefs. There is no known organized Christian worship in large parts of the country. The ethnic minorities, such as the Ngumba, Yaka, Puku, and Benga, have no known organized religious congregations.

Foreign missionary groups operate in the country, both in Bioko and on the mainland, including Seventh Day Adventists, Assemblies of God, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Nondenominational evangelical Christian groups also are present.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The law provides for freedom of religion; however, in practice the Government limited this right in some respects.

The Government generally allows preaching, religious teaching, education, and practice by believers. The Government requires permission for any activities outside church walls; however, in practice this requirement does not appear to hinder organized religious groups.

A religious organization must be registered formally with the Ministry of Justice and Religion before its religious activities are allowed. While religious groups must be approved and registered to function legally, there were no reports during the period covered by this report that the Government refused to register any group. However, information regarding the exact procedure for registering a religious denomination was not available. For example, the Assemblies of God received official recognition in 1993; however, from 1987 through 1993, the group was able to operate although it was not recognized officially. The approval process usually takes several years, but such delay apparently is due primarily to general bureaucratic slowness and is not the result of a policy designed to impede the operation of any religious group. The exact number of registered denominations is not

available.

Foreign missionaries work throughout the country, generally without impediment.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government and President Teodoro Obiang Nguema's ruling Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea (PDGE) have reacted defensively to any criticism, and the Government continued to restrict freedom of expression of the clergy, particularly regarding any open criticism of the Government. The Government requires permission for any religious activity outside church walls; however, in practice this requirement did not appear to hinder organized religious groups. There were some reports that a growing international presence and the Government's focus on petroleum exploration and development resulted in a decrease of religious restrictions during the period covered by this report; however, these reports could not be confirmed.

A 1992 law includes a stated official preference towards the Catholic Church and the Reform Church of Equatorial Guinea due to their traditional roots and well-known influence in the social and cultural life of the populace. For example, a Roman Catholic Mass normally is part of any major ceremonial function, such as October 12, a national day.

Religious study is required in schools and is usually, but not exclusively, Catholic.

The Autonomous Rural Development (DAR), a Catholic nongovernmental organization (NGO), sometimes was required to have a government delegate present at its meetings. This restriction apparently was in response to government fears that DAR encourages antigovernment sentiment. The Government required that DAR in the diocese of Ebibeyin inform the local delegate each time that it had a board meeting. The DAR complied with the requirement and received permission to meet, but the local delegate insisted on being present during the meetings. The DAR refused to hold meetings with the delegate present, and consequently it did not hold official meetings during the period covered by this report.

In 2001 some citizens working as missionaries received nonspecific warnings from the Ministry of Justice and Religion against voting for candidates who were not PDGE members; most missionaries were told to appear before the Ministry. Neither further warnings nor a meeting at the Ministry occurred by the end of the period covered by this report.

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.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relations among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Some religious groups believe that they face societal pressures within their regions; however, no specific incidents or violence stemming from religious discrimination have been reported, and such concerns may reflect ethnic or individual as much as religious differences.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The U.S. Embassy based in Yaounde, Cameroon, maintains contact with religious groups, especially American missionaries in the country, and monitors any religious initiatives during periodic visits. During the period covered by this report, Embassy staff met with various religious leaders.

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<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2002/13819pf.htm>