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Benin

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

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 reporting period.

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 8.8 million. According to the 2002 census, the population is 27 percent Roman Catholic, 24 percent Muslim, 17 percent practitioners of Voodoo (Vodun), 6 percent adherents of other traditional indigenous beliefs, and 5 percent Celestial Christians. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent each include Methodists, The 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 foreign residents.

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 Government Respect for 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 constitutional court determines the legal guidelines that govern religious practice. In recent years the court determined that it was illegal to block the access of any group to its religious premises, and discussion and debate about religious belief was a protected free speech right.

The Ministry of National Defense was permitted to intervene in conflicts between religious groups to ensure public order and social peace, provided that the intervention complied with the principle of state neutrality in the management of religious affairs.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Whit Monday, Assumption Day, Eid al-Fitr, All Saints' Day, Tabaski, Christmas, and Traditional Religions Day. 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 was celebrated in the historic town of Ouidah every first Wednesday of May and traditionally included a large celebration of interreligious cooperation. Religious leaders made an effort to bridge the divide between Christians and Muslims and preached a message of tolerance.

Persons who wished to form a religious group must register with the Ministry of the Interior. Registration requirements were 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 were exempted from taxation.

Government officials accorded respect to prominent leaders of all religious groups by attending their induction ceremonies, funerals, and other religious celebrations. Police forces provided security for any religious event upon request.

In accordance with the constitution, which provides for a secular state, public schools were not authorized to provide religious instruction; however, religious groups were permitted to establish private schools.

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 reporting period.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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 that required the intervention of local security forces between Voodoo practitioners and Christians over Voodoo initiation practices.

Interfaith dialogue occurred regularly. The country has a Framework for Interfaith Dialogue, "Cadre de Concertation des Confessions Religieuses du Benin." This institution was created in 2007 to advance interfaith dialogue and social peace.

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. As part of the embassy's efforts to advance interfaith dialogue, Imam Moujahed Mouhammad Bakhach from Fort Worth, Texas, toured three cities from May 4 to 8, 2009, speaking to religious leaders, Muslim women, youth association members, and journalists on Islamic practices; nonviolence in Islam; women in Islam; Islam in the United States; and interfaith dialogue.

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