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Equatorial Guinea

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and 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.

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 10,827 square miles and a population of 750,000. An estimated 93 percent of the population is Christian, of whom 87 percent are Roman Catholic and six percent are Protestant and members of independent denominations; many Catholics reportedly follow traditional beliefs as well. Five percent of the population practices indigenous religious beliefs exclusively. Muslims, Bahais, and practitioners of other religious beliefs each constitute less than one percent of the population. The number of Muslims is increasing due to the growing number of West African and Middle Eastern immigrants.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections; however, the government remained sensitive to criticism, and church leaders usually avoided discussions that could be construed as critical of the government or government officials. The constitution specifically mentions support for the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The government generally allowed preaching, religious teaching, and practice by believers. The government required religious groups to obtain permission for any activities outside of places of worship; however, in practice this requirement did not appear to hinder religious groups from holding retreats and other meetings. Door-to-door evangelism reportedly occurred without incident.

A 1992 presidential decree regulates the exercise of religious freedom. This decree provides official preference for the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea. While the decree does not hinder the practice of other religions, its preferential effects can be observed in some circumstances; for example, Catholic masses are a normal part of any major ceremonial function, such as the October 12 National Day and June 5 President's Birthday. In addition Catholic and Reform church officials are exempt from airport entry and exit taxes.

The decree regulates the registration of religious groups. In order to register, churches must submit a written application to the Ministry of Justice, Worship, and Penitentiary Institutions. The director general in the ministry oversees compliance with the decree and the registration process. Registration was not required of the Catholic and Reform churches.

The application and approval process may take several years, but such delay appeared to be the result of bureaucratic inefficiency and not policy. The government reportedly approved more rapidly those groups that provided beneficial social programs, such as health projects or schools. Enforcement of registration requirements was inconsistent. Unregistered groups that operated can be fined. Such fines were rarely applied, but the government periodically announced over the radio that any unregistered church was subject to fines or closure and should register as soon as possible.

The fundamental law on religion states that each person is free to study his or her religion and should not be forced to study another faith, but the reality was somewhat more complicated. Religious study is optional in public schools and can be replaced by a course in social or civic education. Catholic schools were often the best available option for many students, but non-Catholics were expected to participate in daily Catholic lessons and prayers in those schools. In recent years many more Protestant churches have opened; some of them, including Reform Church, evangelicals, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, and Baptists, operated their own primary and secondary schools.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Corpus Christi, Immaculate Conception, and Christmas.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

The government continued to emphasize its view that the role of religion and of religious leaders was purely spiritual and discouraged political criticism by government clergy.

Some non-Catholic pastors, who also worked for the government as civil servants, continued to report their supervisors strongly encouraged participation in religious activities related to their government positions, including attending religious events such as Catholic Mass.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

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.

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