

EQUATORIAL GUINEA

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

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

The U.S. government met with the government and religious leaders as part of its overall policy to support human rights. These discussions focused on the need to promote mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for all religious groups, especially the marginalized.

Section I. Religious Demography

An estimated 93 percent of the population is Christian, of which 87 percent is Roman Catholic and 6 percent 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, Baha'is, and practitioners of other religious beliefs each constitute less than 1 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

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom; however, the government remains sensitive to criticism, and religious leaders usually avoid discussions that could be construed as critical of the government or government officials.

In 1991 the government adopted Law Number 4/1991, the Regulation of the Exercise of Religious Freedom, which establishes religious freedom and outlines the procedures for registering a religious institution with the government. In

addition, a 1992 presidential decree provides additional regulations including official preference for the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea. Catholic and Reformed church officials are exempt from airport entry and exit taxes.

The 1992 decree regulates the registration of religious groups. In order to register, religious groups must submit a written application to the Ministry of Justice, Religious Affairs, 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 Reformed churches. Unregistered groups that operated can be fined.

The government generally allows religious teaching and practice, as well as preaching. The government requires religious groups to obtain permission for any activities outside of places of worship. Door-to-door evangelism reportedly occurs without incident.

The Law on the Regulation of the Exercise of Religious Freedom states that each person is free to study his or her religion and should not be forced to study another faith, but the situation is somewhat more complicated. Religious study is optional in public schools and can be replaced by a course in social or civic education. Catholic schools are often the best available option for many students, but non-Catholics are expected to participate in daily Catholic religious lessons and prayers in those schools. In recent years many more Protestant groups, including the Reformed Church, Evangelicals, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, and Baptists, have 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.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The 1992 presidential decree did not hinder the practice of other religions; however, its preference for the Catholic and Reformed churches could be observed in some circumstances. For example, Catholic masses were a normal part of any major ceremonial function, such as the October 12 National Day and June 5 President's Birthday.

The application and approval process for registration sometimes took several years, but such delay was reportedly due to bureaucratic inefficiency and not policy. The government reportedly approved more rapidly those groups that provided beneficial social programs, such as health projects or schools. Government enforcement of registration requirements was inconsistent. The government rarely applied fines, but periodically announced over the radio that any unregistered religious group was subject to fines or closure and should register as soon as possible.

Despite the government's requirement that religious groups obtain permission for any activities outside of places of worship, in practice, this requirement reportedly did not hinder religious groups from holding retreats and other meetings.

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

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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. government officials met with religious leaders and government officials as part of an overall policy to promote human rights. These discussions focused on the need to promote mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for all religious groups, especially the marginalized.