

# **BENIN 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

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

The U.S. embassy hosted interfaith activities and engaged in discussions about religious freedom in the United States and peaceful religious relations in Benin.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The population is approximately 9.6 million, according to a U.S. government source. According to the 2002 census (the most recent official survey), the population is 27 percent Roman Catholic, 24 percent Muslim, 17 percent Voudon (Voodoo), 6 percent other indigenous religious groups, and 5 percent Celestial Christian. Groups constituting less than 5 percent each include Methodists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Rosicrucians, Bahais, Baptists, Pentecostals, the Unification Church, and Eckankar. Seven percent claim no religious affiliation.

Many individuals who identify themselves as Christian or Muslim also practice Voodoo or other traditional religions.

Most Muslims are Sunni and are concentrated in northern areas. The few Shia Muslims are primarily foreign residents and reside in Benin for commercial reasons. Southern areas are more heavily Christian.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitutional court determines rules on religious matters as part of its mission to guarantee respect for religious freedom. The court has determined that it is illegal

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to block access of any group to its religious premises and that discussion and debate regarding religious belief is a protected right of free speech.

The national defense ministry has the authority to intervene in conflicts between religious groups to ensure public order and social peace, provided the intervention complies with the principle of state neutrality in religious affairs.

Persons who wish to form a religious group must register with the interior ministry. Registration requirements are the same for all religious groups.

By law, public schools may not provide religious instruction. Religious groups may establish private schools.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Traditional Religions Day, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Whit Monday, Assumption Day, Eid al-Fitr, All Saints Day, Tabaski, and Christmas.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

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

The government provided yearly financial support of about 500 million CFA (\$1 million), distributed among all religious groups.

### **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.

Respect for religious diversity and differing affiliations was widespread at all levels of society and in all regions including within families and communities. There were reports of occasional conflict requiring police intervention between Voodoo practitioners and Christians over Voodoo initiation practices. In general these were peacefully resolved with assistance from local authorities.

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Public television featured celebrations of religious holidays and honors given to prominent religious leaders, including ordination anniversaries and funerals.

Religious leaders worked to ensure tolerance between Christians and Muslims. On May 2, there was a large Ecumenical Day celebration of interreligious cooperation in the historic town of Ouidah.

Interfaith dialogue occurred regularly. The national framework for interfaith dialogue, the “Cadre de Concertation des Confessions Religieuses du Benin,” held quarterly sessions to advance interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

In August the embassy hosted an iftar with influential leaders from Muslim and Christian groups. Embassy staff spoke about Islam in America and engaged guests in a discussion about tolerance and the peaceful relations between religious groups in Benin.

In December the ambassador and embassy staff met with fourteen leaders of the local association of imams. The imams discussed the vision of their association: to educate and train Imams, to inform the population about Islam, and to promote nonviolence and mutual understanding.