

EQUATORIAL GUINEA 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.

U.S. embassy representatives met with the government and religious leaders to discuss support for religious freedom. These discussions focused on the need to promote mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for all religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to a 2009 UN estimate, the population is 676,000. An estimated 93 percent is Christian, of which 87 percent is Roman Catholic and 6 percent belongs to Protestant and independent denominations. Many Catholics reportedly adhere to some aspects of traditional beliefs as well. Five percent of the population adheres exclusively to indigenous religious beliefs. Muslims, Bahais, and members of other religious groups 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.

A 1991 law establishes religious freedom and outlines the procedures for registering a religious group with the government. A 1992 presidential decree provides additional regulations, including official preference for the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea.

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The 1992 decree regulates registration of religious groups. Religious groups must submit a written application to the Ministry of Justice, Religious Affairs, and Penitentiary Institutions. The ministry's director general oversees compliance with the decree and the registration process. The Catholic and Reformed churches are not required to register. Unregistered groups can be fined. Religious groups must obtain permission for any activities outside of places of worship.

The law states that each person is free to study his or her religion and may not be forced to study another faith. Religious study is optional in public schools and can be replaced by a course in social or civic education.

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.

Government practice demonstrated a preference for the Catholic and Reformed churches. Catholic masses were a normal part of all major ceremonial functions, such as the October 12 National Day and the President's Birthday on June 5.

The application and approval process for registration sometimes took several years, but the delay was reportedly due to bureaucratic inefficiency rather than policy. The government more rapidly approved applications by groups providing beneficial social programs, such as health projects or schools. The government enforced registration requirements inconsistently. The government rarely levied fines, but periodically announced that unregistered religious groups were subject to fines or closure, and should register as soon as possible.

Although the government required that religious groups obtain permission for any activities outside of places of worship, in practice, this did not prevent religious groups from holding retreats and other meetings. Door-to-door evangelism occurred without incident.

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 Catholic masses.

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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.

Protestant groups, including the Reformed Church, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Baptists and evangelical groups, continued to operate their own primary and secondary schools without hindrance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with religious leaders and government officials to discuss religious freedom. The ambassador met with several members of the Muslim community to discuss religious freedom, tolerance, and non-violence. These discussions focused on the need to promote mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for all religious groups, especially for minority religious groups.