

EQUATORIAL GUINEA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship. It prohibits political parties based on religious affiliation. By decree and practice, the government gave preferences to the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea, the only religious groups not required to register, and Catholic masses were a normal part of major ceremonial functions. A new government decree prohibited the celebration of religious acts outside of specified hours and registered locations without government permission and required foreign religious representatives to obtain advance permission from the government to participate in religious activities.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 722,000 (July 2014 estimate). An estimated 93 percent of the population is Christian, of which 87 percent is Roman Catholic and 6 percent belongs to Protestant and other denominations. Many Christians reportedly adhere to some aspects of traditional beliefs as well. Five percent of the population adheres exclusively to indigenous religious beliefs. Muslims, Bahais, members of other religious groups, and atheists each constitute less than 1 percent of the population. The Muslim population is increasing due to the growing number of West African and Middle Eastern immigrants.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship. It prohibits political parties based on religious groups. The law provides regulations establishing official preference for the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed

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Church of Equatorial Guinea and outlines procedures for registration of religious groups.

To register, 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. Those seeking to register must supply a set of documents about the church and its membership, and the ministry may conduct an inspection before processing the application. The Catholic and Reformed Churches are not required to register. Some other religious groups, such as Muslims or Bahais, need register only once. Other, newer denominations may be required to renew their registration periodically. Unregistered groups can be fined or closed.

A Ministry of Justice, Religious Affairs, and Penitentiary Institutions decree, published April 4, specifies any religious activities taking place outside the hours of 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. or outside of registered places of worship require permission from the ministry. The decree prohibits religious acts or preaching within private residences and requires foreign religious representatives or authorities to obtain advance permission from the ministry to participate in religious activities.

The constitution states individuals are free to study their religion in schools 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.

Government Practices

Government practice demonstrated a preference for the Catholic and Reformed Churches, and to a lesser extent the Islamic faith. 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. Catholic leaders occasionally met publicly with government officials, the only religious leaders to do so. Like the Catholic Church, the Reformed Church is not required to register and at official functions its leaders are often seated in preferred locations. The First Lady, a Catholic, was financing the construction of a new mosque in Malabo.

The application and approval process for registration sometimes took several years. Evangelical denominations from neighboring countries, some of which were the subject of complaints concerning excessive noise or financial practices, faced

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greater scrutiny. 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 unregistered religious groups were subject to fines or closure and should register as soon as possible.

The government required religious groups to obtain permission for any activities outside of places of worship, but permission was routinely granted, allowing religious groups to hold retreats and other meetings in other locations. A permit is required for door-to-door proselytism, and such permits are routinely issued. Door-to-door proselytism occurred without incident.

Protestant groups, including the Reformed Church, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Baptists, and Evangelicals, operated primary and secondary schools.

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

There were reports government security forces monitored the movements of non-citizen Muslims for national security reasons.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

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 religious leaders, including bishops of the Catholic Church, the heads of several Protestant congregations, and Muslim leaders to discuss the need to promote mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for all religious groups, especially for minority religious groups.