

GUINEA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution stipulates the state is secular, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for the right of individuals to choose and profess their religion. Some non-Muslims stated the government continued to favor Muslims over non-Muslims. For the first time, the government extended subsidies for members of non-Muslim communities to make religious pilgrimages.

Although intermarriage between persons of different religious groups was common, communities and family members sometimes rejected or harassed individuals who converted from Islam.

The U.S. embassy encouraged religious leaders to work together and with the government and others to disseminate Ebola awareness information and a message of acceptance toward Ebola survivors. The embassy also hosted several iftars, including one with the grand imam at his village in Kindia, to convey a message of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.5 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the Secretariat of Religious Affairs (SRA), approximately 85 percent of the population is Muslim, 8 percent is Christian, and 7 percent adheres to indigenous religious beliefs. Much of the population incorporates some indigenous rituals into its religious practices. Muslims are generally Sunni. Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and several evangelical groups. There is a small Bahai community. There are also small numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, and adherents of traditional Chinese religious beliefs among foreign residents.

Muslims constitute a majority in all four major regions of the country. Christians are most numerous in Conakry, large cities, the south, and the eastern Forest Region. Adherents of indigenous religious beliefs are most prevalent in the Forest Region.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

GUINEA

The constitution stipulates the state is secular, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for the right of individuals to choose and profess their religious faith. It recognizes the right of religious institutions and groups to establish and manage themselves freely. It bars political parties that identify with a particular religious group.

By law the SRA must approve all religious groups. Groups must provide a written constitution and application to the SRA along with their address and a fee of 250,000 Guinean francs (GNF) (\$35). The SRA then sends the documents to the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization (the equivalent of an interior ministry) for final approval and signature. Once approved, the group becomes an officially recognized religion. Each registered religious group must present to the government a report on its affairs every six months. Registration entitles religious groups to value-added tax (VAT) exemptions on incoming shipments and to select energy subsidies.

Unregistered religious groups are not entitled to VAT exemptions and other benefits. By law the government can shut down unregistered groups and expel foreign group leaders. There is limited opportunity for legal appeal of these penalties.

Religious groups may not own radio or television stations.

The imams and administrative staff of the principal mosque in Conakry, and the principal mosques in the main cities of the four regions, are government employees. These mosques are directly under the administration of the government. Other mosques receive government subsidies.

The secretary general of religious affairs appoints six national directors to lead the Offices of Christian Affairs, Islamic Affairs, Pilgrimages, Places of Worship, Economic Affairs and the Endowment, and Inspector General. The SRA is charged with promoting good relations among religious groups and coordinates with other members of the Interreligious Council, which includes most religious groups (the Jehovah's Witnesses, by choice, are not members), as well as the SRA.

Government Practices

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Some non-Muslim clerics stated the government continued to favor Muslims over non-Muslims but did not provide examples.

The SRA controlled religious messaging by issuing weekly themes for inclusion in Friday sermons at mosques and Sunday sermons in churches. Although the SRA did not control every mosque and church, its inspectors were present in every region and responsible for ensuring that mosque and church sermons were consistent with SRA directives. Clerics whom the SRA judged to be noncompliant were subject to disciplinary action.

The SRA was unable to facilitate a pilgrimage to Mecca for the Muslim community as Saudi Arabia did not permit Ebola-affected countries to send pilgrims, and 10,000 applicants were unable to travel. For the first time, however, the government provided GNF three billion (\$420,000) to subsidize the travel of 100 Catholics to pilgrimage sites in France, Spain, and Portugal, and committed to support travel to other Christian holy sites in 2015.

According to the SRA several unregistered religious groups operated freely but did not receive the tax and other benefits received by registered groups. The small Jehovah's Witness community reportedly proselytized from house to house without interference, though neither it nor the Bahai community requested official recognition.

The compulsory primary school curriculum did not include religious studies. Islamic schools were prevalent throughout the country and were the traditional forum for religious education. Some Islamic schools were wholly private, while others received local government support. Islamic schools, particularly common in the Fouta Djallon region, taught the compulsory government curriculum along with additional Quranic studies. Private Christian schools, which accepted students of all religious groups, existed in the nation's capital and most other big cities. They taught the compulsory curriculum but did not receive government support and held Christian prayers before school.

The government allocated free broadcast time on state-owned national television for Islamic and Christian programming, including Islamic religious instruction, Friday prayers from the central mosque, and church services. Muslim broadcasts received more air time, while different Christian groups received broadcast time on Sundays on a rotating basis. The government permitted religious broadcasting on privately owned commercial radio

GUINEA

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In some parts of the country, strong familial, communal, cultural, social, or economic pressure discouraged conversion from Islam. The media regularly reported incidents of societal reactions against such conversions. For example, an imam in the town of Forecariah tried to burn his son alive for converting to Christianity. The son was rescued and sought refuge within the Christian community. The SRA also reported that communities and family members sometimes rejected or harassed individuals, particularly women, who converted from Islam.

There were reports of disputes among Muslim communities. The SRA and Islamic Council, for example, mediated an ongoing dispute between Tidiana and Wahhabi Muslims over access to a mosque in Labe.

Intermarriage between people of different religious groups was common.

Many Muslim students not enrolled in Islamic schools received religious education at madrassahs, some of which were associated with mosques and others supported by local communities. Unlike the Islamic schools, the madrassahs did not teach the compulsory primary school curriculum. Although the government did not recognize the madrassahs, it allowed them to operate freely. They focused on Quranic studies and instruction was in Arabic rather than French. Funds from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Gulf states supported some madrassahs. Most students in madrassahs also attended public or private schools teaching the compulsory curriculum.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy personnel worked closely with religious leaders, including the SRA; grand imams of Conakry, Kankan, and Labe; Catholic and Anglican bishops; and Islamic and Christian clergy to advocate for tolerance. The embassy encouraged religious leaders to work together and with the government and others to disseminate Ebola awareness information, promote safe burials, and spread a message of tolerance toward Ebola survivors.

During a visit by the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, the embassy organized a meeting at Conakry's Grand Mosque, where she met with the grand

GUINEA

imam, the Catholic archbishop, the Anglican bishop, and Ebola survivors and their health care professionals. The meeting received local and international media coverage as an example of interfaith cooperation aimed at easing the stigmatization of Ebola survivors. The Ambassador visited an Ebola treatment unit in the first days of the outbreak; also present were leading Islamic and Catholic clergy as well as the minister of health. Together, they made statements in multiple local languages for dissemination via Friday prayers and Sunday sermons.

The embassy hosted several iftars, including one with the grand imam at his village in Kindia, to convey a message of religious freedom and tolerance.