

# **COTE D'IVOIRE 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religious opinion to all consistent with law and order and prohibits religious discrimination in employment. It forbids speech that encourages religious hatred. As in previous years, the government organized and funded Hajj pilgrimages for Muslims and pilgrimages to Israel for Christians. The government continued to include Muslim and Catholic leaders in political reconciliation efforts. The Independent Electoral Commission (CEI) Central Commission included positions for Muslim and Christian religious leaders.

The president declared October 24 a national day of mourning for those Ivoirians killed in the Mina stampede near Mecca on September 24, and both Muslim and Christian communities held prayer services to recognize the victims. In observance of the tragedy, a large Catholic church in Abidjan hosted an interfaith prayer service with attendance of leaders from the Christian and Muslim communities.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed the importance of religious tolerance with political figures in the government and the opposition. The Ambassador and embassy representatives met with religious leaders and groups throughout the year to discuss the role they could play in maintaining a climate of tolerance in the run-up to the October presidential elections. A Voice of America (VOA) interactive radio program continued to feature discussion and debate of religious issues on the national Islamic radio station. In October the embassy sponsored a concert in Abidjan promoting tolerance that featured musical groups of different faiths and attracted thousands of attendees.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 23.2 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the most recent census in 2008, 39 percent is Muslim, 33 percent Christian, and 12 percent adherents of indigenous religious beliefs. Many Christians and Muslims also practice some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs.

Traditionally, the north is associated with Islam and the south with Christianity, although adherents of both religious groups live throughout the country.

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Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Harrists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Southern Baptists, Copts, adherents of the Celestial Church of Christ, and members of the Assemblies of God. Muslim groups include Sunni, Shia, and Ahmadi. Other religious groups include Buddhists, Bahais, Rastafarians, followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas), and Bossonists, who follow traditions of the Akan ethnic group.

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

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution stipulates a secular state that respects all beliefs and treats all individuals equally under the law, regardless of religion. It prohibits religious discrimination in public and private employment and provides for freedom of conscience and religious opinion consistent with the law, the rights of others, national security, and public order. It prohibits "propaganda" that encourages religious hatred. It recognizes the right of political asylum in the country for individuals persecuted for religious reasons.

The Ministry of Interior's Department of Faith-Based Organizations is charged with promoting dialogue among religious groups and between the government and religious groups, providing administrative support to groups trying to become established, monitoring religious activities, and managing state-sponsored religious pilgrimages and registration of new religious groups.

The law requires all religious groups to register with the government. Groups must submit an application to the Department of Faith-Based Organizations. The application must include the group's bylaws, names of the founding members and board members, date of founding, and general assembly minutes. The department investigates the organization with the aim of ensuring that the group has no members or purpose it deems to be politically subversive. There are no penalties prescribed for groups that do not register or benefits for those that do.

Religious education is not included in public school curriculum, but is included in private schools affiliated with a particular faith.

#### **Government Practices**

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The government continued to fund and to organize Hajj pilgrimages for Muslims and pilgrimages to Israel for Christians. The president declared October 24 a national day of mourning for those Ivoirians killed in the Mina stampede near Mecca on September 24.

The government provided access to state-run television and radio for religious programming to religious groups that requested it.

The government included prominent Muslim and Catholic religious leaders in political and social reconciliation efforts and as advocates for peace in the run-up to the October presidential elections. Following the completion of the Dialogue, Truth, and Reconciliation Commission's mandate in December 2014, Catholic Archbishop Paul-Simeon Ahouana began service as chair of the National Commission for the Reconciliation and Compensation of Victims of Crisis established in March.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

In observation of the National Day of Mourning for the Ivoirians killed in the Mina stampede near Mecca, both Muslim and Christian communities held prayer services to recognize the victims. A large Catholic church in Abidjan hosted an interfaith prayer service with attendance of leaders from the Christian and Muslim communities.

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

U.S. embassy representatives discussed the importance of religious tolerance with political figures in the government and the opposition.

U.S. embassy representatives also met with religious and civil society to discuss religious freedom and tolerance and the role religious groups could play in helping to maintain a climate of tolerance in the run-up to the October presidential elections. The embassy provided financial and technical assistance support to a civil society platform of election observers that included a multid denominational council of religious leaders to represent the religious community perspective in the political discourse. In the run up to the October elections, the platform promoted responsible rhetoric and urged religious leaders to encourage peace throughout the electoral period.

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Under an embassy-facilitated agreement between VOA and Al-Bayane Radio, VOA's French-language *Dialogue des Religions* (*Dialogue of Religions*) continued to reach millions of listeners across the country with its weekly broadcast on the Islamic radio station. *Dialogue des Religions* is an interactive program featuring host and guests – often religious scholars or journalists – who discussed religious issues in the news and answered listeners' questions on various facets of religion.

On October 10, the embassy commemorated Daniel Pearl World Music Days by hosting a concert featuring a wide variety of musical groups, with the Ambassador giving remarks about tolerance before the concert. The concert highlighted religious, ethnic, and political tolerance, peace, and reconciliation.