

EQUATORIAL GUINEA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship and prohibits political parties based on religious affiliation. The law also states that the country has no national religion. By decree and practice, however, the government gives preference to the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea, the only religious groups not required to register their organization or activities with the Ministry of Justice, Religious Affairs, and Penitentiary Institutions (MJRAPI). The government provides funds to the Catholic Church and its schools for educational programming. Catholic masses remained a normal part of official ceremonial functions. A decree requires all religious groups except the Catholic Church to seek authorization for religious activities outside the prescribed hours of 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. or outside of registered places of worship, and the law requires a permit for door-to-door proselytism. The authorities routinely granted permission for religious groups to proselytize and to hold activities outside of registered places of worship, but generally denied permission for religious activities not within the prescribed hours. Evangelical Christian groups continued to hold activities outside the prescribed period.

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

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials, including the Director General of Religion in the Ministry of Justice, Religious Affairs, and Penitentiary Institutions to discuss the ability of individuals to practice any religion free of discrimination. Embassy staff members also met with religious leaders to discuss the promotion of mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for all religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 759,000 (July 2016 estimate). A local 2015 census conducted in collaboration with the United Nations, however, puts the total population at 1.2 million. According to the most recent estimates, 88 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 5 percent is Protestant. Many Christians reportedly practice some aspects of traditional indigenous religions as well. Two percent of the population is Muslim (mainly

Sunni). The remaining 5 percent adhere to animism, the Bahai Faith, and other beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship and prohibits political parties based on religious affiliation. The law also states the country has no national religion. The law states individuals are free to change religions. Christians converting to Islam are permitted to add Muslim names to their Christian names on their official documents.

Regulations establish an official preference for the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea. Neither group is required to register. The state provides funding to the Roman Catholic Church for its schools, the only religious group to receive such funding for operating educational institutions.

Catholic and Reformed churches are not required to register with the MJRAPI. Some long-standing religious groups such as Muslims or Bahais hold permanent authorizations and are not required to renew their registrations with the MJRAPI. Newer groups and denominations may be required to renew their registration annually. To register, religious groups at the congregational level must submit a written application to the director general of religion in the MJRAPI. Those seeking to register must supply detailed information about the leadership (e.g., curriculum vitae) and members of the group; construction plans of the religious building; property ownership documents, accreditations, and religious mandate; and pay a fee of 100,000 Central African Francs (CFA) (\$161). The director general of religion adjudicates these applications and may order an inspection by the MJRAPI before processing.

The adjudication of the registration application rests solely with the director general of religion – the commission of representatives of several government agencies that is supposed to adjudicate the applications has been inactive for several years. Those seeking to register must supply information about the group such as a list of members, and the MJRAPI may conduct an inspection before processing an application. The government may fine or shut down unregistered groups. The law requires a permit for door-to-door proselytism.

A MJRAPI decree specifies that any religious activities taking place outside the hours of 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., or outside of registered places of worship, require prior authorization from the MJRAPI. The decree prohibits religious acts or preaching within private residences if those acts involve people who do not live there. Foreign religious representatives or authorities must obtain advance permission from the MJRAPI to participate in religious activities. The decree exempts the Catholic Church.

The government recognizes official documents issued by authorized religious groups, such as birth certificates and marriage certificates.

The constitution states individuals are free to study religion in schools and may not be forced to study a faith other than their own. Catholic religious classes are part of the public school curriculum, but with a note from a leader of another religious group, such study may be replaced by non-Catholic religious study, or by a recess.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

While the government routinely granted religious groups permission for any activities outside of places of worship, except in private homes, it usually denied permits to hold activities outside of the prescribed hours of 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. All religious groups, including small Bahai and Jewish groups, were allowed to hold services as long as they finished before 9 p.m. and did not disturb the peace. Evangelical Christian groups continued to hold activities outside the prescribed period. The authorities routinely issued permits for proselytism. Religious leaders said door-to-door proselytism occurred without incident.

Foreign evangelical missionaries were required to obtain residency permits to remain in the country. Evangelical Christians reported the permits were prohibitively expensive, leading some missionaries to risk the consequences of not obtaining or renewing such permits. The local police reportedly enforced the requirement with threatened deportation and requested a small bribe as an alternative. There were no deportations reported. The residency permits were not required for Catholic missionaries.

Protestant groups, including the Reformed Church, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Baptists, and other evangelical Christians operated primary

and secondary schools. These schools had to be registered with the government and fulfill standard curriculum requirements.

Catholic masses were a normal part of all major ceremonial functions, such as National Day on October 12 and the President's Birthday on June 5. Catholic leaders met publicly with government officials and were usually the only religious leaders to do so. Catholic and Reformed Church leaders were often seated in preferred locations at official functions. On May 28, President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo opened the new Catholic Church of Our Lady of Bisila, which was totally financed by the government, on the mountain peak above Malabo.

The President of the Federation of Evangelical Churches stated that its annual Easter procession went smoothly and without any intervention from the police. In previous years, the national police initially tried to stop the procession, but the event was allowed to proceed after proof of government authorization.

Some non-Catholics who worked for the government continued to report that their supervisors strongly encouraged participation in religious activities related to their government positions, including attending Catholic masses. Government officials stated they were expected to attend the president's birthday Mass at the Catholic Church.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim leaders, as well as other religious leaders with large congregations, reported no incidents involving restriction of religious practice, and had not heard of any incidents against other groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with the director general of religion to discuss religious freedom and the ability of individuals to practice any religion free of discrimination. The embassy also met with the imam for Malabo, the Archbishop of Malabo, evangelical Christian pastors, Protestant leaders, and a representative of the Bahai Faith, to acquire their insights as well as to discuss the need to promote mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for all religious groups, especially for minority religious groups.