

SAO TOME AND PRINCIPE 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship and equality for all, irrespective of religious belief. It grants religious groups autonomy and the right to teach their religion. Religious groups must register with the government.

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

U.S. embassy staff based in Gabon, in periodic visits to the country, met with key government officials and religious leaders to encourage continued respect for religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 198,000 (July 2016 estimate). The Roman Catholic bishop's office estimates more than 85 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, approximately 12 percent Protestant, and less than 2 percent Muslim. Protestant groups include Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, and evangelical Protestant groups, including the Evangelic Assembly of Christ, the Universal Church of Christ, and the Thokoist Church. The number of Muslims has increased over the past 10 years due to an influx of migrants from Nigeria, Cameroon, and other African countries. Some Christians and Muslims also adhere to aspects of indigenous beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship. It provides for equality of rights and obligations irrespective of religious belief or practice and for freedom of religious groups to teach their faith and to organize themselves and their worship activities. According to the constitution, these rights are to be interpreted in harmony with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and may only be restricted in cases envisaged in the constitution and or suspended during a state of emergency or siege declared according to the terms of the constitution and the law.

Religious groups must register with the government. If a religious group does not register, the group is subject to fines and possible expulsion if it is a foreign religious group. To register, a group must send a letter requesting authorization to the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights (MOJ). Once the group obtains authorization, it must submit the following documents to a notary public: the MOJ's approval letter; the group's statutes; the minutes or report from a meeting attended by representatives of the group and signed by its president and secretary; copies of the national identity cards of those who attended this meeting; a list of board members; and a certificate from the registrar's office attesting that no existing organization has the same name. After a payment of 320,000 dobras (\$13.60) for notarial fees, an announcement is published in the government gazette and the group may then operate fully as a registered group without restrictions. Once registered, a religious group does not need to register again. Registered religious groups receive the same benefits, such as tax exemptions, as registered nonprofit organizations.

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

Government Practices

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

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

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. U.S. embassy staff in Gabon engaged with government officials to encourage continued respect for religious freedom. U.S. embassy officials met with religious leaders, including the Roman Catholic bishop, evangelical religious leaders, and an imam, to discuss the involvement of religious groups in social issues affecting their communities.