

COTE D'IVOIRE 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and worship, consistent with law and order, and prohibits religious discrimination. It emphasizes that religious tolerance is fundamental to the nation's unity, national reconciliation, and social cohesion. It forbids speech that encourages religious hatred. In late August, following sometimes violent protests against President Alassane Ouattara's candidacy for a third term in office, Catholic Archbishop of Abidjan Cardinal Jean-Pierre Kutwa, acting in what he said was his personal capacity, gave a press conference in which he said the President's candidacy was "not necessary." The Cardinal stated there was "increasing radicalization" across the political spectrum and "unacceptable violence" during the protests. He called for peace and reconciliation in the lead-up to the October presidential election. Following the Cardinal's statement, members of the ruling coalition, including Catholic cabinet ministers, held a press conference at the Catholic cathedral in Abidjan and said the Cardinal's words did not help calm "rising societal tensions" in the country. Some commentators, both supportive and critical of the administration, suggested Kutwa's statement showed he supported the opposition, although Kutwa repeatedly denied having any political affiliation. Posters on social media self-identifying as Muslim accused the Cardinal of opposing the President, also a Muslim, because of the President's religion. In March, as part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government met with religious leaders of a wide spectrum of faiths to ask them to encourage their followers to respect government decrees related to COVID-19, in particular, a 15-day ban on meetings of more than 50 persons. Many religious groups then cancelled religious services and closed places of worship temporarily.

The director of the nationwide Islamic radio station and television network Al-Bayane, an imam, stated that he had a strong relationship with Christian leaders, including the Archbishop of Abidjan, and stressed the similarities between the monotheistic religions practiced in the country. A Catholic priest serving as spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Abidjan said relations between religious communities of different faiths were generally "warm," particularly between Christian and Muslim leaders. Religious leaders and civil society representatives stated that leaders across the religious spectrum were broadly united in their desire to work toward peace and reconciliation, particularly in the context of the presidential election.

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials to discuss the state of religious freedom and tolerance in the country. The Ambassador and other embassy representatives met with religious leaders throughout the year. Embassy representatives hosted virtual roundtable discussions with religious community leaders and met with the director of the nationwide Islamic radio network and television station, Al-Bayane, several times. Some discussions focused on the role of religious media outlets in promoting peace, social cohesion, and religious freedom, particularly in the context of the October presidential election.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 27.5 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the most recent census in 2014, 42.9 percent of the population is Muslim, 33.9 percent Christian, and 3.6 percent adherents of indigenous religious beliefs. Many individuals who identify as Christian or Muslim also practice some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs.

Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Harrists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Southern Baptists, Greek Orthodox, Copts, the Celestial Church of Christ, and Assemblies of God. Muslim groups include Sunnis (95 percent of Muslims), many of whom are Sufi; Shia (mostly members of the Lebanese community); and Ahmadis. Other religious groups include Buddhists, Baha'is, Rastafarians, followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jews, and Bossonists, who follow traditions of the Akan ethnic group.

Muslims are the majority in the north of the country, and Christians are the majority in the south. Members of both groups, as well as other religious groups, reside throughout the country.

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 specifically prohibits religious discrimination in public and private employment and provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, and worship 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 Department of Faith-Based Organizations (DGC), which is part of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, is charged with promoting dialogue among religious groups as well as between the government and religious groups, providing administrative support to religious groups attempting to become established in the country, monitoring religious activities, and managing state-sponsored religious pilgrimages and registration of new religious groups.

The law requires all religious entities to notify the government of their existence. Foreign religious entities with a presence in the country require authorization from the Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, and all religious entities – foreign and local – need to register with the DGC. Whether a religious entity is categorized as local or foreign is based on its funding sources and the make-up of its executive board. Entities with foreign funding or foreign board members are considered foreign. Local religious entities are allowed to operate two months after they submit their registration application, without official approval. Foreign religious entities are technically not allowed to begin operating until they receive authorization, but this is not enforced.

There are no penalties prescribed for entities that do not register, but registered entities benefit from government support, such as free access to state-run television and radio for religious programming if requested. Registered religious entities are not charged import duties on devotional items, such as religious books or rosaries. Registered religious entities are also exempt from property tax on the places of worship they own.

To register, an entity must submit an application to the DGC that includes its bylaws, names of the founding members and board members, date of founding, and general assembly minutes. The DGC investigates the entity to ensure it has no members or purpose deemed politically subversive and that no members have been judicially deprived of their civil and political rights.

There are legal penalties for threatening violence or death via an “information system.” When such a threat is of a “racist, xenophobic, religious, or ethnic [nature] or refers to a group characterized by race, color, descent, or national or

ethnic origin,” the law provides for a prison term of 10 to 20 years and a fine of 20 million to 40 million CFA francs (\$37,800 to \$75,600).

Religious education is not included in the public school curriculum but is often included in private schools affiliated with a particular faith. Religious groups running the schools normally provide opt out procedures. Teachers and supervisory staff in religiously affiliated schools must participate in training offered by the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training before the school receives accreditation from the ministry.

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

Government Practices

In late August, after some protests against President Ouattara’s candidacy for a third term resulted in violent clashes with both police and supporters of the President, Cardinal Kutwa, acting in what he said was his personal capacity, gave a press conference in which he said the President’s candidacy was “not necessary.” The Cardinal bemoaned “increasing radicalization” across the political spectrum and “unacceptable violence” during these demonstrations. He called for peace and reconciliation in the period preceding the October presidential election. Following the Cardinal’s statement, members of the ruling coalition, including Catholic cabinet ministers, held a press conference at the Catholic cathedral in Abidjan and said the Cardinal’s words did not help calm “rising societal tensions” in the country. Some commentators, both supportive and critical of the administration, suggested Kutwa’s statement showed he supported the opposition, although Kutwa repeatedly denied having any political affiliation. Posters on social media self-identifying as Muslim accused the Cardinal of opposing the President, also a Muslim, because of the President’s religion.

In February, a Muslim cultural association petitioned the government for authorization to host a Malian preacher who intended to give a sermon on “Islam, Peace, and Development” at a sports arena in Abidjan. The government asked that the association postpone the event due to unspecified security concerns in the region. The requesting association eventually cancelled the event.

In late January, leaders of both opposition and progovernment political movements called on their supporters to join a planned “march for peace” organized by Catholic youth and women’s groups. Civil society organizations and other commenters said these actions were an attempt to co-opt the event for political

purposes. A spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Abidjan said marchers intended to pray for peace in connection with the October presidential election and that the event was nonpolitical. On January 25, two Facebooks posts by unknown individuals threatened violence against Catholics participating in the march. Authorities opened an investigation to identify the sources of the posts, which were deleted. On January 26, Cardinal Kutwa announced an indoor rally would be held instead of a march due to concerns regarding the “dangers of infiltration” and the safety of Catholic participants.

The DGC communicated regularly with religious leaders and groups to encourage caution in social media messaging to prevent potentially inflammatory communications.

The DGC stated that many unregistered local religious groups operated in the country, which it said was due to lack of knowledge or understanding of registration requirements by the groups’ leaders. The DGC said it had not identified any foreign religious groups operating without authorization.

In September, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations with the Holy See, the government held a ceremony attended by President Ouattara and the Apostolic Nuncio and released a stamp bearing the likeness of the President and Pope Francis. The director general of the postal authority said the theme of the stamp was “peace.”

On March 18, as part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government met with a wide spectrum of religious leaders to ask them to encourage their followers to respect government decrees related to the pandemic, in particular, a 15-day ban on meetings of more than 50 persons announced March 16. The same day, the Supreme Council of Imams of Cote d’Ivoire (COSIM, the country’s Sunni Muslim association) voluntarily closed all mosques for 15 days and later extended the closure for three additional months. Some Christian churches cancelled services, and the Episcopal Conference of the Cote d’Ivoire, representing Catholic bishops, issued a statement requiring all members to observe the 50-person limit at religious services. Religious leaders also appeared in government-produced public service announcements urging respect for COVID-19 prevention measures.

Religious leaders said they sought to collaborate with the government and urged the government to disseminate its COVID-19 messaging through them in order to reach as many persons as possible, including religious communities living in remote areas.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The director of the nationwide Islamic radio station and television network Al-Bayane, an imam, stated that he had a strong relationship with Christian leaders, including the Archbishop of Abidjan, and stressed the similarities between the monotheistic religions practiced in the country. A Catholic priest serving as spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Abidjan said relations between religious communities of different faiths were generally “warm,” particularly between Christian and Muslim leaders. He noted his appearance on Radio Al-Bayane in September in connection with the publication of a book by a Muslim scholar for which the priest wrote the preface.

Religious leaders and civil society representatives stated that leaders across the religious spectrum were broadly united in their desire to work toward peace and reconciliation, particularly in the context of the presidential election. In October, two weeks before the election, the Alliance of Religions for Peace, which included Christian and Muslim leaders, held a national interfaith prayer for peace and social cohesion in Abidjan. During the event, members of the alliance called on opposing political leaders to resume dialogue and urged political parties to refrain from referring to religious denominations in their discourse, noting that political party members came from a variety of religious backgrounds.

Civil society leaders said that religiously based hate speech sometimes was used on social media, but they stated that influential political and religious leaders did not use such language.

According to religious leaders and civil society organizations, many persons reportedly regularly celebrated each other’s religious holidays by attending household or neighborhood gatherings, regardless of their own faith.

Some Muslim leaders stated the community took steps to prevent the influence of what they called intolerant forms of Islam in the country, including providing imams with themes for sermons and advising imams to closely vet guest preachers before allowing them to give sermons in their mosques.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials discussed the state of religious freedom and tolerance in the country with government officials. The Ambassador and other embassy officials

met with senior Christian and Muslim religious leaders, including during the Ambassador's trip to the central part of the country in late September, to urge respect for all faiths, including the right not to practice a religion at all. Other topics covered included freedom of religion and belief, and responsible rhetoric, including religiously tolerant discourse, during the electoral period. Embassy officers also met regularly with the director of Al-Bayane, affiliated with COSIM, to discuss the role of religious media outlets in promoting peace, social cohesion, and religious freedom.

In July, the embassy hosted a virtual roundtable discussion attended by religious leaders from several major cities in which, among other topics, the leaders discussed civic engagement in the religious community and the role of religion in maintaining social cohesion in the country. In June, the embassy hosted a virtual discussion with local religious leaders and a Muslim student association on the religious community's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in which participants highlighted Christians and Muslims working together to disseminate information to their communities on COVID-19 prevention measures. In May, during an embassy-sponsored virtual roundtable, eight Christian and Muslim religious leaders from across the country discussed the nonhealth impact of COVID-19 on religious communities.

In February, the embassy's monthly radio debate program hosted a discussion on the role of religious leaders in promoting peace and social cohesion. The director of Radio Al-Bayane and a senior Catholic priest led the discussion, which had more than 100 participants, including religious leaders, representatives of political parties, members of civil society organizations, journalists, and students.