

EQUATORIAL GUINEA 2020 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 states that the country has no national religion, but by decree and practice, the government gives preference to the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea, which are the only religious groups not required to register their organization or activities with the Ministry of Justice, Religious Affairs, and Penitentiary Institutions (MJRAPI). On April 5, the government disbanded two religious groups for “noncompliance” with restrictions in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In January, the government led efforts to raise funds to restore a Catholic cathedral damaged in a fire.

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

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials, including the MJRAPI minister, to discuss the importance of religious freedom and respect for human rights. Embassy staff members met with the Catholic Archbishop of Malabo and also with the respective presidents of the evangelical Christian and Pentecostal communities and members of the Jewish and Baha’i communities to discuss their experiences as minority religious groups and religious tolerance in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 836,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). The most recent local census, conducted in 2015, estimates the total population at 1.2 million. According to the most recent government estimate, 88 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 5 percent Protestant. Many Christians reportedly practice some aspects of traditional indigenous religions as well. Two percent of the population is Muslim, mainly Sunni, according to the 2015 census. Most of the Muslim population consists of expatriates from West Africa. The remaining 5 percent adhere to animism, the Baha’i Faith, Judaism, 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 states there is no national religion and individuals are free to change religions. By law, Christians converting to Islam are permitted to add Muslim names to their Christian names on their official documents.

Neither the Catholic Church nor the Protestant Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea is required to register with the MJRAPI. The only religious group to receive state funding for operating educational institutions is the Catholic Church.

Some longstanding religious groups, such as Methodists, Muslims, and Baha'is, 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 MJRAPI director general of religious affairs. Groups seeking to register must supply detailed information about the leadership (e.g., curriculum vitae) and members of the group; construction plans for religious buildings; property ownership documents, accreditations, and religious mandate and a fee of 350,000 Central African francs (CFA francs) (\$660). The director general of religious affairs adjudicates these applications and may order an inspection by the MJRAPI before processing. The government may fine or shut down unregistered groups. The law requires a permit for door-to-door proselytizing.

An 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 preauthorization from the ministry. The decree prohibits religious acts or preaching within private residences if those acts involve persons 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 such study may be replaced by non-Catholic religious study or by a recess with a note from a leader of another religious group.

There are several Catholic schools. Protestant groups, including the Reformed Church, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Methodists, Baptists, and other Christians, operate primary and secondary schools. These schools must be registered with the government and fulfill standard curriculum requirements.

Most foreigners, including foreign evangelical Christian missionaries, are required to obtain residency permits to remain in the country. Catholic missionaries are exempt from the residency permit requirement.

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

Government Practices

On April 5, the government disbanded two religious groups for “noncompliance” with restrictions under a national emergency declared in March to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The government said the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God-Stop Suffering, run by Brazilian missionaries, and the locally based Ministry of Liberation, Health, and Prophecy demonstrated “civil disobedience and a lack of social responsibility and solidarity.” The decree disbanding the two groups prohibited the churches from holding events of any type, whether for worship or other reasons; annulled the residence permits for foreign pastors and other church leaders and ordered their deportation as soon as possible; and annulled the permits issued to the church leadership to operate in the country.

During the year, the government maintained the price of registration of religious groups at 350,000 CFA francs (\$660), and religious groups could apply to reregister every two years instead of annually.

While the government continued routinely to grant permission for religious groups to hold activities outside of places of worship with the exception of private homes, it usually denied permits to hold activities outside of the prescribed hours of 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., according to religious leaders. Authorities permitted all religious groups, including a small number of Baha’i and Jewish groups, to hold services as long as they finished before 9 p.m. and did not disturb the peace. Evangelical Christian groups stated they continued to hold activities outside the prescribed period with no repercussions.

Evangelical Christians continued to report that residency permits were prohibitively expensive at 400,000 CFA francs (\$760) for a two-year period, leading some missionaries to risk the consequences of not obtaining or renewing such permits. Local police reportedly enforced the requirement with threats of deportation and requested a small bribe as an alternative. There were no deportations reported. While the residency permit fee for foreign missionaries was the same as for all other foreigners, if the missionary coordinated with the MJRAPI, a residency permit could be obtained for free, provided applicants could prove their missionary status and pass the requisite security checks. Catholic missionaries did not require residency permits to remain in country.

Catholic masses remained a normal part of all major ceremonial functions and were held, for example, on Independence Day (October 12) and the President's Birthday holiday (June 5). Catholic leaders were the only religious leaders to regularly meet publicly with the highest-level government officials. Catholic and Reformed Church leaders were often seated in preferred locations at official functions. After part of the Cathedral of Santa Isabel of Malabo was damaged in a fire on January 16, the government organized the collection of public and private donations for its renovation.

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 that it was expected that they attend major events such as the President's Birthday Mass at nearby Catholic churches.

Unlike in previous years, the government did not allow the Muslim community to celebrate Eid al-Adha in Malabo Stadium due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

The National Day of Prayer, celebrated by religious groups the first Sunday in April, was held online due to the pandemic. Parliament passed a law in 2017 making the National Day of Prayer an annual event.

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

The Ambassador discussed religious freedom with the Minister of MJRAPI and discussed government efforts to promote religious tolerance during meetings with other government officials.

The U.S. embassy posted social media messages on the importance of religious freedom as well as on the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. The embassy also commemorated the International Day of Religious Freedom on October 28 with a social media post.

Work was planned on the renovation of the Batete Catholic Church, which was built during the country's colonial period. In 2019, the embassy awarded \$100,000 for the project to the World Monuments Fund through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. A U.S. oil company and the national government also contributed funds to the project. After an initial assessment early in the year, work was hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Embassy officials also spoke with the Catholic Archbishop of Malabo, evangelical Christian pastors, Protestant leaders, and representatives of the Baha'i Faith and Jewish communities for 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.