

GUINEA-BISSAU 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes the separation of religion and state and the responsibility of the state to respect and protect legally recognized religious groups. In September, during a press conference, Attorney General Fernando Gomes expressed concern regarding what he said was an increase of verbal attacks in media from citizens encouraging hatred and ethnic and religious divisions. He exhorted citizens and media to respect a diversity of opinions and repudiate any form of inappropriate language. Various groups criticized the government's August 27 announcement that it would introduce the teaching of the Arabic language in schools, stating that it favored Islam over other religions and would "reinforce the country's Islamization." In September, President Umaro Sissoco quashed the proposal, stating, "We are a secular country. In our society, in our system, Arabic is not part of our teaching. Here it is Portuguese, French, and English."

Some Muslims reported continuing concerns regarding what they termed "stricter" Islamic practices taught by foreign imams to the local Muslim population.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The United States directs its engagement in the country from the U.S. embassy in Dakar, Senegal. In January, the Ambassador held a meeting with the Bishop of Bissau to promote peace and democracy for the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.9 million (midyear 2020 estimate). Estimates of the religious composition of the population vary widely, but according to a 2010 study by the Pew Research Center, approximately 45 percent is Muslim, 31 percent follows indigenous religious practices, and 22 percent is Christian. The remaining 2 percent are small communities of Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews, many of whom are foreign citizens.

The Fula (Peuhl or Fulani) and Mandinka (Malinke) ethnic groups are the most numerous followers of Islam. Muslims generally live in the north and northeast, and most Muslims are Sunni; Shia communities exist as well. Adherents of indigenous religious beliefs generally live in all but the northern parts of the

country. The Christian population, including Roman Catholics and Protestants, is primarily from the Pepel, Manjaco, and Balanta ethnic groups and is concentrated in Bissau and along the coast. Catholics represent more than half of the Christian population, while Brazilian Protestant and other Protestant denominations maintain a significant number of congregations and missions throughout the country. Large numbers of Muslims and Christians hold indigenous beliefs as well.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates the state shall be separate from religious institutions and shall respect and protect legally recognized religious groups, whose activities shall be subject to the law. It holds freedom of conscience and religion as inviolable, even if the state declares a state of siege, and provides for freedom of worship as long as it does not violate the fundamental principles cited in the constitution. It establishes that all citizens are equal under the law, with the same rights and obligations, irrespective of their religion. Political parties and labor unions are barred from affiliating with a particular religious group. The constitution recognizes the freedom of religious groups to teach their faith.

The government requires religious groups to obtain licenses. The formal process, which is not often followed, entails providing the name, location, type, and size of the organization to the Ministry of Justice. Under the law, religious groups are recognized as associations and benefit from tax exemptions.

In accordance with the constitution, there is no religious instruction in public schools. The Ministry of Education regulates and enforces the decree against religious teaching in public schools. There are some private schools operated by religious groups.

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

Government Practices

In September, during a press conference, Attorney General Fernando Gomes expressed concern regarding how the right to freedom of expression was exercised in the country. He said that through mass media, including radio and internet, there was what he termed an “increasing wave of verbal attacks and insults by some citizens, often using abusive words that encourage hatred, ethnic, and

religious divisions.” He exhorted citizens and the media to respect a diversity of opinions and to strengthen Guinean democracy by repudiating any form of inappropriate language.

On August 27, the government announced it would introduce the teaching of the Arabic language in schools. Minister of Education Arceni Balde stated that one of the objectives of the measure was to “place Muslim students at the same level as students from other religious denominations,” a stance that was heavily criticized by opponents of the decision. The president of the civil society group Movement of Conscious and Nonconformed Citizens said the Minister’s words were a sign of discrimination and further stated it was necessary “to condemn and denounce the appropriation of state institutions to foment tribalism and religious discrimination.” According to media reporting, various sectors of society regarded the initiative as an attempt to “reinforce the country’s Islamization.”

In September, President Sissoco said the proposal to introduce the teaching of Arabic in the country’s school system would not be implemented. He stated, “We are a secular country. In our society, in our system, Arabic is not part of our teaching. Here it is Portuguese, French, and English.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some Muslims reported continuing concerns about what they termed “stricter” Islamic practices taught by foreign imams to the local Muslim population. Media reported imams’ concerns regarding the increase in Salafist Quranic schools, new mosques with “unvetted” imams, online recruitment of youth to religious radicalism, and the threat these developments posed to the country’s tradition of religious tolerance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The United States directs its engagement in the country from the U.S. embassy in Dakar, Senegal. In January, the Ambassador held a meeting with the Bishop of Bissau to discuss promoting peace and democracy in the country.