

COTE D'IVOIRE 2019 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 July the Department of Faith-Based Organizations within the Ministry of Interior organized a panel discussion with religious leaders on the use of information and communication technology.

Unknown individuals vandalized two Catholic churches in separate incidents in July and August. In October Muslim and Catholic leaders, along with government representatives, participated in the eighth Inter-Religious Conference for Peace hosted by the Sant'Egidio community. The three-day conference culminated in an interreligious prayer session and a march for peace.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials to emphasize the importance of human rights, including religious freedom, throughout the year. The Ambassador and other embassy representatives also met with religious leaders throughout the year, as well as with the director of the nationwide Muslim radio station Al-Bayane. Some discussions focused on the role of religious media outlets in promoting peace, social cohesion, and religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 26.9 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the most recent census in 2014, among those who responded, 50 percent are Muslim, 41 percent Christian, and 5 percent adherents of indigenous religious beliefs. Approximately 20 percent of the population did not respond to the census. Many individuals who identify as Christian or Muslim also practice some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs.

Christian denominations 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 Sufis; 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, 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 is charged with promoting dialogue among religious groups and 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 groups to register with the government. Foreign religious groups with a presence in the country require authorization from the Department of Faith-Based Organizations, and local religious associations need to register with the same department. To register, a group must submit an application to the Department of Faith-Based Organizations. The application must include the group's bylaws, names of the founding members and board members, date of founding, and general assembly minutes. The department investigates the organization to ensure the religious group has no members or purpose deemed politically subversive and that no members are deprived of their civil and political rights. There are no penalties prescribed for groups that do not register, but those that register benefit from government support such as free access to state-run television and radio for religious programming to groups that request it. Registered religious groups are not charged import duties on devotional items such

as religious books and rosaries. Registered religious groups are exempt from property tax on the places of worship they own.

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. According to an official survey from the Directorate for Strategy, Planning, and Statistics of the ministry, only 343 of 2,781 of Islamic schools are authorized by the ministry and follow the national curriculum, as well as an Islamic curriculum.

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

Government Practices

In July the Department of Faith-Based Organizations organized a panel discussion on the use of information and communication technology and encouraged religious leaders and groups to be more cautious in social media messaging to prevent potentially inflammatory communications. Approximately 50 religious leaders, lawyers, and police officers attended. A representative from the Ministry of Security and Civil Protection explained there were legal penalties for posting information on social media that contributed to a disruption in public order. The law allows a prison term of one to five years and a fine 300,000 to 3,000,000 CFA francs (\$520 to \$5,200) for “anyone who by means of press or by other means of publication” incites violence, xenophobia, hateful speech, or other acts considered to be against national security.”

The government continued to supervise and organize Hajj pilgrimages for Muslims and fund pilgrimages to Israel, Portugal, Spain, and France for Christians, as well as fund local pilgrimages for members of independent African Christian churches. The government organized and transported 6,005 pilgrims to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj, compared with 6,800 the previous year. The government also supervised the organization of the pilgrimage for 2,459 private pilgrims. The government funded pilgrimages for 1,200 Christians to Europe and Israel, compared with 942 the previous year. The government also assisted 725 adherents of traditional religions in pilgrimages within the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

During the night of July 1, according to media, unidentified individuals vandalized a Catholic church in Grand-Yapo, north of Abidjan. The parish priest said assailants destroyed a statue of the Virgin Mary, scattered the fragments at the entrance to the church, and trampled on them. Authorities investigated the incident but made no arrests. The following day the Bishop of Agboville called for prayer, calm, and social cohesion.

On the evening of August 2, unknown individuals removed the head from a statue of the Virgin Mary in a Catholic church in Abobo-Doume, north of Abidjan.

During an October 12 religious service, the Catholic Archbishop of Abidjan encouraged political figures and members of the government to contribute to a calm and peaceful electoral year in 2020. He said that many citizens lived in fear because in the recent past, minor disputes had sometimes led to intercommunal (but not religiously motivated) conflict in the country.

Christian and Muslim religious leaders, civil society, government officials, and political leaders took part in the eighth Inter-Religious Conference for Peace hosted by the Sant'Egidio Community in Abidjan on October 4-6. Religious and political leaders as well as civil society representatives criticized what they called attempts by government officials to use their groups to advance their own causes. An imam from the Higher Council of Imams of Cote d'Ivoire (COSIM) said Christians and Muslims should work together to send messages of peace and unity to the population.

The director of the nationwide Muslim radio station Al-Bayane, an imam, told participants in a discussion on religious media outlets that he had a strong relationship with the Archbishop of Abidjan and stressed that listeners of his station included non-Muslims.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy representatives met with government officials, including from the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights and the Ministry of Solidarity, Social Cohesion, and the Fight against Poverty, to emphasize the

importance of human rights, including religious freedom, throughout the year. Embassy representatives also discussed with government officials opportunities to partner with the international community to promote religious freedom. The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with senior Christian and Muslim religious leaders to urge respect for all faiths and promote freedom of belief. Embassy officers also met regularly with the director of the nationwide Muslim radio station Al-Bayane, affiliated with COSIM, to discuss the role of religious media outlets in promoting peace, social cohesion, and religious freedom.