

GUINEA-BISSAU 2019 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. The government did not act in response to a 2018 call from the governor of Gabu Region to increase vigilance against a perceived increase in “stricter” Islamic practices in that region. A variety of political figures expressed concern about the use of religious symbols and practices by candidates during the presidential election campaign.

Media reported imams’ concerns about 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.

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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.9 million (midyear 2019 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. There 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

As of year's end, the government did not act on the October 2018 request by the governor of Gabu for increased central government vigilance over activities associated with what he called stricter Islamic practices, such as women wearing full-face veils in public. The governor said these practices increased due to the influence of immigrants from the Republic of Guinea.

During the presidential election campaign in November, political leaders expressed concerns in the media about the use of religious symbols and practices by candidates. One candidate used the image of a turban traditionally worn by Muslim clerics as a symbol of his campaign. Another candidate held a campaign event that was opened by an imam reciting the Quran.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some Muslim community members reported continuing concerns about what they termed “stricter” Islamic practices taught by foreign imams to the local Muslim population. Media reported imams’ concerns about 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.

Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic leaders continued to hold meetings during the year to discuss the long-running political crisis affecting the country and continued to engage with political leaders in an attempt to resolve the impasse.

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.