

# **EQUATORIAL GUINEA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship. It prohibits political parties based on religious affiliation. The law also guarantees freedom of religion and states there is no national religion. By decree and practice, however, the government gave preferences to the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea, the only religious groups not required to register, and Catholic masses were a normal part of major ceremonial functions. In August in Mongomo, reportedly at the first lady's mother's request, Iglesia Santo en Cristo, an evangelical church serving more than 100 parishioners, was destroyed. The first lady paid for the construction of a mosque, and the president, attending the inauguration of the mosque, gave a speech emphasizing religious tolerance. In October the government cancelled the paid, Sunday morning national radio programs of two religious groups – one evangelical, one Presbyterian. The government licensed a Catholic radio station to begin radio broadcast operation.

Catholic clergy objected to an evangelical church holding services in a small town. The governor required the evangelical church to obtain additional proof that it was registered to hold such services.

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom. Discussions focused on the need to promote mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for all religious groups.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 741,000 (July 2015 estimate). The local 2015 census conducted in collaboration with the UN, however, puts the total population at 1.2 million. Although there are no current estimates, according to earlier figures, 93 percent of the population is Christian and more than 80 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Many Christians reportedly practice some aspects of traditional, indigenous religions as well. Five percent of the population adheres exclusively to indigenous religious beliefs. Muslims, Bahais, members of other religious groups, and atheists each constitute a small percentage of the population. The Muslim population has increased due to immigration from West and Central Africa, as well as from the Middle East.

## EQUATORIAL GUINEA

### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship. It prohibits political parties based on religious groups. The law also provides for freedom of religion and states there is no national religion. Regulations establish an official preference for the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea and outline procedures for registration of other religious groups.

To register, religious groups at the congregational level must submit a written application to the director general of religion in the Ministry of Justice, Religious Affairs, and Penitentiary Institutions. The director general oversees compliance with the law and the registration process. A commission, comprised of representatives of several government agencies, is designated by law to adjudicate applications for registration. The commission, however, is inactive, leaving the adjudication to the director general. Those seeking to register must supply information about the group and its membership, and the ministry may conduct an inspection before processing the application. The Catholic and Reformed Churches are not required to register. Some other long-standing religious groups, such as Muslims or Bahais, need register only once while newer denominations may be required to renew their registration periodically, sometimes annually. Unregistered groups may be fined or closed. The law requires a permit for door-to-door proselytism.

A Ministry of Justice, Religious Affairs, and Penitentiary Institutions decree specifies any religious activities taking place outside the hours of 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. or outside of registered places of worship require prior authorization from the ministry. The decree prohibits religious acts or preaching within private residences if it involves people who do not live there. It requires foreign religious representatives or authorities to obtain advance permission from the ministry to participate in religious activities. The decree exempts the Catholic Church.

The constitution states individuals are free to study their religion in schools and may not be forced to study another faith. Catholic religious classes are part of the public school curriculum, but with a note from a leader of another religious group, such study may be replaced by non-Catholic religious study, or by a recess. The law states individuals are free to change religions. Christians converting to Islam

## EQUATORIAL GUINEA

are permitted to add Muslim names to their Christian names on their official documents.

### Government Practices

According to religious leaders, the government enforced registration requirements inconsistently. They stated the government rarely levied fines, but periodically announced unregistered religious groups were subject to fines or closure and should register as soon as possible.

In August in Mongomo, reportedly at the first lady's mother's request, Iglesia Santo en Cristo, an evangelical church serving more than 100 parishioners, was destroyed. To date, the church has not been indemnified.

Unlike in previous years, the Governor of Bioko Norte granted the Federation of Evangelical Churches' request for an Easter procession in Malabo, and 4,000 people took part. The national police initially tried to stop the procession, but when the religious leaders insisted they had the governor's authorization, the event was allowed to proceed.

The government licensed a Catholic radio station to begin operation. In October an evangelical and a Presbyterian group, who broadcast their programs on Sunday mornings in paid time slots (at a cost of 20,000 Central African Francs (CFA); \$33 per month) on the state-owned national radio, were told that the minister of information, press, and radio, had cancelled its programming. Weekly Catholic and Muslim programs were allowed to continue on national radio free of charge. Until the end of 2014, the national radio reportedly charged 200,000 CFA (\$332) per month for the Muslim broadcast.

Protestant groups, including the Reformed Church, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Baptists, and evangelicals operated primary and secondary schools. These schools had to be registered with the government and fulfill standard curriculum requirements.

While the government routinely granted religious groups permission for any activities outside of places of worship, except in private homes, it usually denied permits to hold activities outside of the prescribed hours of 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Evangelical groups continued to hold activities outside the prescribed period. The

## EQUATORIAL GUINEA

authorities routinely issued permits for proselytism. Religious leaders said door-to-door proselytism occurred without incident.

As of the beginning of the year, foreign evangelical missionaries were required to obtain residency permits to remain in the country. Evangelicals reported the permits were prohibitively expensive, leading some missionaries to risk the consequences of not obtaining or renewing such permits. The local police reportedly enforced the requirement with threatened deportation. The residency permits were not required for Catholic missionaries.

Catholic masses were a normal part of all major ceremonial functions, such as the October 12 National Day and the June 5 President's Birthday holiday. According to foreign news reports, the government was constructing a residence for the pope in Mongomo, with an enclosed chapel. Catholic leaders met publicly with government officials and were usually the only religious leaders to do so. Catholic and Reformed Church leaders were often seated in preferred locations at official functions.

Some non-Catholics who worked for the government continued to report their supervisors strongly encouraged participation in religious activities related to their government positions, including attending Catholic masses.

President Teodoro Obiang created an Office of Islamic and Arabic Affairs in October.

The first lady, a Catholic, financed a new mosque that was completed in Malabo. The president attended the inauguration and delivered a speech on religious tolerance.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

A Catholic church reportedly attempted to prevent evangelical pastors from holding services for an evangelical congregation in a small town and sought the Governor of Bioko Sur's intervention. Although the evangelical church was registered nationally, the governor asked the church to obtain specific proof from the director general of religion that it was permitted to hold services in that town. The evangelical church's request for authorization to meet with the congregation remained pending with the director general.

## **EQUATORIAL GUINEA**

Some religious leaders stated they were concerned that, because the commission designated by law to adjudicate applications for registration was inactive, the government was granting registration too freely, including to entities without an authentic religious motivation.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials met with the director general of religion to discuss religious freedom. The embassy also met with bishops of the Catholic Church, the imam for Malabo, and evangelical pastors to discuss the need to promote mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for all religious groups, especially for minority religious groups.