

BENIN 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes a secular state and provides for freedom of religious thought, expression, and practice. All religious groups must register with the government. Government officials at the department and municipal levels have the authority to issue orders suspending certain types of religious practice to maintain peace, although they rarely used it in practice, according to religious groups. Police only interfered in religious practices when there was a “disruption of public order,” according to the Ministry of Interior, which cited two examples of internal disputes in which authorities intervened. Central and local government officials generally included religious leaders in decision-making involving civil society leaders. On March 21, government officials met with religious leaders to discuss the closure of places of worship to limit the spread of COVID-19. In May, Archbishop of Cotonou Roger Houngbedji expressed disappointment that places of worship were grouped with bars and restaurants as leisure services, rather than with markets as essential services which remained open.

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

U.S. embassy representatives regularly spoke with leaders of religious groups in cities throughout the country to address religious freedom and tolerance. Throughout the year, the embassy also engaged with religious leaders in conducting its development activities and as part of its ongoing outreach to civil society organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12.9 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2013 census, 48.5 percent of the population is Christian, 27.7 percent is Muslim (mostly Sunni), 11.6 percent practice Voodoo, 2.6 percent are members of indigenous religious groups, 2.6 percent are members of other religious groups, and 5.8 percent declare no religious affiliation. The largest Christian denominations are Roman Catholicism, with 25.5 percent of the population, and Celestial Christians, with 6.7 percent. Other religious groups include Methodists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baha’is, Baptists, Pentecostals, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), the Very Holy Church of Jesus Christ of Baname, and Eckankar followers.

Many individuals who identify themselves as Christian or Muslim also practice Voodoo or other traditional religions.

Most Muslims are concentrated in northern regions. There are some Shia Muslims and most are foreign residents. Southern regions are predominantly Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes a secular state, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for freedom of religious thought, expression, and practice, consistent with public order as established by law and regulations.

The Ministry of Interior has the authority to deploy the Republican Police to intervene in conflicts between religious groups to ensure public order and social peace, provided the intervention complies with the principle of state neutrality in religious affairs. Local department and municipal leaders may also issue orders limiting religious practice to maintain public order.

Persons who wish to form a religious group or establish a religious affiliation must register with the Ministry of Interior. Registration requirements include submission of administrative materials (including the applicant's birth certificate, police record, request letter, copy of identification, and the group's internal rules) and payment of a registration fee of 50,000 CFA francs (\$95). If a group is not registered, the Ministry of Interior may order the closing of its religious facilities until the group registers.

By law, public schools may not provide religious instruction. Religious groups may establish private schools with authorization from the state and may benefit from state subsidies.

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

Government Practices

According to the Ministry of Interior's Director of Internal Affairs and Religion, the primary catalyst for government involvement in religious affairs was "disruption of public order." The director said early in the year police intervened in Atacora and Abomey when members of a traditional religious group threatened

one another in an internal dispute over leadership succession. In both cases, according to the director, the Republican Police maintained peace by monitoring the disputes and did not use force. Overall, the director stated that government involvement in religious activities was infrequent.

On February 19, Littoral Department (encompassing the de facto administrative capital city of Cotonou) Prefect Jean-Claude Codjia issued an order banning the Voodoo Egungun religious group from publicly holding the Egungun masquerade performance within the department. According to the press, the prefect issued the order following a February 16 internal Egungun conflict which injured six members of the group and caused a public disturbance. The order did not prevent the group from practicing Egungun rituals privately.

On March 21, government officials met with religious leaders from the Catholic Church, Protestant churches, and Muslim groups to discuss the closure of places of worship to limit the spread of COVID-19. Following the meeting, all places of worship were ordered closed. On May 27, the government ordered the reopening of places of worship beginning June 2 in consultation with national religious leaders and the government's interministerial COVID-19 committee. Many religious groups stated they did not perceive the measures as discriminatory. In a May 12 statement, however, Archbishop of Cotonou Roger Hounbedji said he was "embarrassed" to see "churches remaining closed as mere gathering places, just like bars and places of leisure, while open markets, supermarkets, and other places continued to bring people together."

The government regularly relied on religious leaders to share accurate information about COVID-19, according to press reports. On March 16, the mayor of Parakou in the north of the country met with religious leaders to ask them to help curb misinformation about the pandemic. On July 15, the mayor of Abomey-Calavi asked religious leaders to distribute masks and hand sanitizer to congregants. On August 5, the mayor of Abomey in the central region discussed management of religious events amid COVID-19 with leaders of indigenous religious groups. Municipal officials also said they explained the roles, responsibilities, and obligations of religious leaders to enforce measures such as social distancing, handwashing, and wearing of masks.

Government officials continued to attend inductions, funerals, and other religious ceremonies organized by religious groups. State-owned television often broadcast these events. Police continued to provide security for religious events upon request.

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 and Engagement

Embassy representatives met with leaders of religious groups and encouraged religious tolerance. From March 6 to 11, embassy representatives visited Ketou, Bohicon, Dassa and Parakou in the central and northern part of the country, where they met with leaders of Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious groups to discuss the status of religious freedom and relations among religious groups in those cities. In Parakou, embassy representatives met with seven imams and Islamic scholars to discuss religious freedom and tolerance.

Embassy officials met with religious leaders individually and via roundtable discussions. During the year, the embassy held individual meetings with Voodoo leaders, Celestial Christian leaders, and imams from the Organization of Young Muslims for Interreligious Peace. In February, the Ambassador met with Imam Razack Samari in Djougou, in the northwest of the country, to discuss the imam's efforts to combat religious extremism. Samari owns radio station La Voix Islamique, which broadcasts messages of religious tolerance and gender equality to its primarily Muslim listeners. The station's director, a previous participant in a U.S. exchange program on the topic of interfaith dialogue, interviewed the Ambassador during her visit to Djougou about the embassy's efforts to support interfaith dialogue and peace.