

SAO TOME AND PRINCIPE 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship and equality for all, irrespective of religious belief. It grants religious groups autonomy and the right to teach their religion. Religious groups must register with the government. In contrast with the previous year, there were no incidents reported involving the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. The group resumed services and repaired houses of worship that were vandalized in 2019.

Religious leaders, especially Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist leaders, joined government COVID-19 awareness campaigns and developed television and radio messages in support of prevention measures.

U.S. embassy staff based in Sao Tome met virtually with key government officials in the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration, and Human Rights and with religious leaders to encourage continued respect for religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 211,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). The Roman Catholic Bishop's office estimates more than 85 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, approximately 12 percent Protestant, and less than 2 percent Muslim. Protestant groups include Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Evangelic Assembly of Christ, Universal Church of Christ, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, and Thokoist Church. The number of Muslims has increased over the past two decades due to an influx of migrants from Nigeria, Cameroon, and other African countries. Some Christians and Muslims also adhere to aspects of indigenous beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship. It provides for equality of rights and obligations irrespective of religious belief or practice and for freedom of religious groups to teach their faith and to organize themselves and their worship activities. According to the

constitution, these rights are to be interpreted in harmony with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and may be restricted only in cases envisaged in the constitution or suspended during a state of emergency or siege declared according to the terms of the constitution and law.

Religious groups must register with the government. If a religious group does not register, the group is subject to fines and possible expulsion if it is a foreign religious group. To register, a group must send a letter requesting authorization to the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration, and Human Rights. Once the group obtains authorization, it must submit the following documents to a notary public: the ministry's approval letter; the group's statutes; the minutes or report from a meeting attended by at least 500 representatives of the group and signed by its president and secretary; copies of the national identity cards of those who attended this meeting; a list of board members; and a certificate from the Registrar's Office attesting that no existing organization has the same name. After a payment of 1,000 dobras (\$50) for notarial fees, an announcement is published in the government gazette, and the group may then operate fully as a registered group. Once registered, a religious group does not need to register again. Registered religious groups receive the same benefits, such as tax exemptions, as registered nonprofit organizations.

Religious education exists in the official curriculum but is not required. There were no reports of religious education being provided in public schools. There are two religious schools, one Catholic and the other Seventh-day Adventist. The Ministry of Education provides oversight on the curricula of religious schools, and both schools are open to church members and nonmembers. They provide a general education, as well as a religious education.

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

Government Practices

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God resumed services and renovated and repaired their churches that were vandalized in 2019. There were no further incidents reported during the year involving this religious group.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders, especially Catholic and Seventh-day Adventist leaders, joined government COVID-19 awareness campaigns and developed television and radio messages in support of prevention measures.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and cessation of flights, U.S. embassy staff in Gabon were not able to make periodic visits to the country. Local staff in Sao Tome engaged in telephone calls with religious leaders and government officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration, and Human Rights to encourage continued respect for religious freedom.