

EQUATORIAL GUINEA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship and prohibits political parties based on religious affiliation. The law states that the country has no national religion, but by decree and practice, the government gives preference to the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea, which are the only religious groups not required to register their organization or activities with the Ministry of Justice, Religious Affairs, and Penitentiary Institutions (MJRAPI). The government did not develop new regulations regarding religious group authorization despite telling religious groups in a December 2018 meeting that it was reviewing the registration process. The government provided funds to the Catholic Church and its schools for educational programming. Catholic masses remained a normal part of official ceremonial functions, such as the nation's Independence Day and the President's Birthday holiday. The law requires a permit for door-to-door proselytism; authorities routinely granted permission for religious groups to proselytize and to hold activities outside of registered places of worship but generally denied permission for religious activities not within the prescribed hours. Evangelical Christian groups continued to hold activities outside the prescribed period without government intervention.

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

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials, including the MJRAPI minister, to discuss the importance of religious freedom and respect for human rights. Embassy staff members met with the Catholic Archbishop of Malabo and with the Imam for Malabo. Embassy staff members also spoke with the respective presidents of the evangelical Christian and Pentecostal communities and members of the Jewish and Baha'i communities to discuss their experiences as minority religious groups and religious tolerance in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 816,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). The most recent local census, conducted in 2015, estimates the total population at 1.2 million. According to the most recent government estimate, 88

percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 5 percent is Protestant. Many Christians reportedly practice some aspects of traditional indigenous religions as well. Two percent of the population is Muslim, mainly Sunni according to the most recent census (2015). The remaining 5 percent adhere to animism, the Baha'i Faith, Judaism, and other beliefs. Most of the Muslim population consists of expatriates from West Africa.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship, and prohibits political parties based on religious affiliation. The law states there is no national religion and individuals are free to change religions. By law, Christians converting to Islam are permitted to add Muslim names to their Christian names on their official documents.

Neither the Catholic Church nor the Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea is required to register with the MJRAPI. The only religious group to receive state funding for operating educational institutions is the Catholic Church.

Some long-standing religious groups such as Methodists, Muslims, and Baha'is hold permanent authorizations and are not required to renew their registrations with the MJRAPI. Newer groups and denominations may be required to renew their registration annually. To register, religious groups at the congregational level must submit a written application to the MJRAPI director general of religious affairs. Those seeking to register must supply detailed information about the leadership (e.g., curriculum vitae) and members of the group; construction plans of religious buildings; property ownership documents, accreditations, and religious mandate; and a fee of 350,000 Central African francs (CFA francs) (\$610). The director general of religious affairs adjudicates these applications and may order an inspection by the MJRAPI before processing. The government may fine or shut down unregistered groups. The law requires a permit for door-to-door proselytism.

An MJRAPI decree specifies that any religious activities taking place outside the hours of 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. or outside of registered places of worship require preauthorization from the MJRAPI. The decree prohibits religious acts or preaching within private residences if those acts involve persons who do not live there. Foreign religious representatives or authorities must obtain advance

permission from the MJRAPI to participate in religious activities. The decree exempts the Catholic Church.

The government recognizes official documents issued by authorized religious groups, such as birth certificates and marriage certificates.

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

Protestant groups, including the Reformed Church, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Methodists, Baptists, and other Christians, operate primary and secondary schools. These schools must be registered with the government and fulfill standard curriculum requirements.

Most foreigners, including foreign evangelical missionaries, are required to obtain residency permits to remain in the country. Catholic missionaries are exempt from the residency permit requirement.

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

Government Practices

The government did not develop new regulations regarding religious group authorization despite telling religious groups in a December 2018 meeting that it was reviewing the registration process. During the year, the government increased the price of authorization of religious groups from 100,000 to 350,000 CFA francs (\$170 to \$610), and told religious groups they could henceforth apply for authorization every two years instead of annually.

While the government continued routinely to grant permission for religious groups to hold activities outside of places of worship, except in private homes, it usually denied permits to hold activities outside of the prescribed hours of 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., according to religious leaders. Authorities permitted all religious groups, including a small number of Baha'i and Jewish groups, to hold services as long as they finished before 9 p.m. and did not disturb the peace. Evangelical Christian groups stated they continued to hold activities outside the prescribed period with no repercussions. On November 16, several hundred persons gathered in the National

Park of Malabo for a widely advertised evangelical Christian service and event in the evening.

Evangelical Christians reported residency permits were prohibitively expensive at 400,000 CFA francs (\$690) for a two-year period, leading some missionaries to risk the consequences of not obtaining or renewing such permits. The local police reportedly enforced the requirement with threatened deportation and requested a small bribe as an alternative. There were no deportations reported. The residency permit fee for foreign missionaries was the same as for all other foreigners; however, if the missionary coordinated with the MJRAPI, the residency permit could be obtained for free, provided missionary status could be proven and the requisite security checks were passed. The residency permits were not required for Catholic missionaries.

Catholic masses remained a normal part of all major ceremonial functions, such as Independence Day on October 12 and the President's Birthday holiday on June 5. Catholic leaders were the only religious leaders to regularly meet publicly with the highest-level government officials. 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 that their supervisors strongly encouraged participation in religious activities related to their government positions, including attending Catholic masses. Government officials stated it was expected that they attend the President's Birthday Mass at the Catholic church.

The government continued to allow the Muslim community to celebrate Eid al-Adha in Malabo Stadium. Hundreds of Muslims participated.

For the second year, no official government representatives participated in the National Day of Prayer celebrated by religious groups the first Sunday in April. Parliament passed a law in September 2017 making the National Day of Prayer an annual event, and the minister of MJRAPI attended the event in 2017 but has not done so since.

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

Embassy officials met with the minister of MJRAPI to discuss religious freedom and tolerance.

Embassy officials also met with the Catholic Archbishop of Malabo, evangelical Christian pastors, Protestant leaders, the Imam for Malabo, and representatives of the Baha'i Faith and Jewish communities for their insights, as well as to discuss the need to promote mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for all religious groups, especially for minority religious groups.