

BENIN 2017 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. Five followers of the Baname Church died on January 28 from asphyxiation in the Department of Oueme after the church leadership advised them to seal themselves in prayer rooms and burn incense and charcoal. The prosecutor at the Court of Porto-Novo ordered the detention of four leaders of the church in connection with the incident and in February brought manslaughter charges against them.

On June 8, two persons died and several were injured during a violent clash between followers of the Baname Church and local residents of the Djime neighborhood in Abomey due to church followers' statements that local residents deemed offensive to the historic King of Abomey. On August 20, members of the Zangbeto brotherhood prevented members of the Church of the Assemblies of God from attending Sunday services in Doukonta, in the southwest, after the church pastor accused them of stealing a chicken from him for a ritual purpose. Interfaith dialogue occurred regularly throughout the country.

Embassy officials toured three predominantly Muslim cities in the northern part of the country to meet with Muslim leaders, Muslim women's associations, and Quranic teachers. Discussions focused on religious freedom issues, interfaith dialogue, and the rejection of religious intolerance and violence. The Ambassador participated in interreligious events, where she advocated interreligious dialogue in support of peace.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11 million (July 2017 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 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 Christian with 6.7 percent. Other smaller religious groups include Methodists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons),

Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahais, Baptists, Pentecostals, the Family Federation of World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), 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 areas. The few Shia Muslims are primarily foreign residents. Southern areas 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 Defense through the gendarmes, generally in rural areas, and the Ministry of Interior through the police, generally in cities, have the authority 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. On July 18, the government announced the police force and the gendarmerie would merge into a single entity under the Ministry of Interior effective January 1, 2018.

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 (\$89). If a group is not registered, the Ministry of Interior orders the closing of the religious facilities until the group registers.

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

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

Government Practices

On the night of January 28, five followers of the Baname Church died from asphyxiation in the department of Oueme and several more were hospitalized after church leaders told followers to shut themselves in their prayer rooms and burn incense and charcoal sold to them by the church. Following the incident, the prosecutor at the Court of Porto-Novo ordered the detention of four priests of the church and in February entered manslaughter charges against them. The church leader, who, according to media reports, is known for opposing other religions, especially voodoo, and who has stated that she was a “living god” was not arrested or charged; she later told a radio reporter that the five who died were not really church members, but “people who came to test us.”

Government officials attended inductions, funerals, and other religious ceremonies organized by various groups. State-owned television often broadcast these events. Police provided security for any religious event upon request.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of interreligious conflict that involved intervention by government security forces. On January 8, two persons died and several were injured during a violent clash between followers of the Baname Church and local residents of the Djime neighborhood in Abomey due to church followers’ statements that local residents deemed offensive to the historic King of Abomey, Bahanzin. Church members also threatened to destroy voodoo shrines in Abomey. On January 9, police intercepted a car transporting 26 armed followers of the Church of Baname who authorities said were on a revenge mission to Djime. After the clashes, the leadership of the Church of Baname stated that the police and gendarmes failed to take action despite prior knowledge of the planned attack on followers of the Church of Baname. In response to the complaint, on January 11, the government placed the heads of the police and gendarmes in Abomey on a six-month administrative leave before assigning them to other posts; the case closed.

On August 20, members of the Zangbeto brotherhood blockaded the Church of the Assemblies of God in the village of Doukonta in the commune of Lokossa, in the southwestern part of the country, preventing Sunday services from taking place. The incident occurred in response to accusations by the pastor and his family members on August 17 that some members of the Zangbeto brotherhood had stolen a chicken from the pastor’s chicken coop for a ritual purpose. Local authorities and the police met with the leaders of the two religious groups to quell the tension between the two religious communities.

Interfaith dialogue occurred regularly. On September 23, the Community of Sant'Egidio in Benin held an interreligious conference in Cotonou, gathering Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious leaders along with government officials and members of the diplomatic community. The conference hosted a number of panels, with discussion sessions, on issues such as peace, human rights, and interfaith dialogue. Participants signed a communique calling for peace and religious harmony.

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of its establishment in the country, the Ahmadi Muslim community organized a series of interreligious conferences in Allada, Bohicon, Lokossa, Parakou, Kandi, Bassila, and Porto-Novo. Religious leaders, local authorities, and government officials attended the conferences, which focused on religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, social cohesion, and peace. The government sent representatives to deliver keynote remarks at the conferences, which, according to observers, highlighted government interest in advancing interreligious dialogue.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met periodically with imams and other religious leaders to encourage religious tolerance. On June 12-14, embassy officials visited the predominantly Muslim north, including Parakou, the country's second largest city; Djougou, fourth largest city; and Copargo. The embassy delegation met with imams, members of mosque congregations, Muslim women's associations, and Quranic teachers. The Ambassador underscored the rejection of religious intolerance and violence.

At the September 23 interreligious conference hosted by the Community of Sant'Egidio in Benin, the Ambassador delivered remarks highlighting the promotion of peace through interfaith dialogue and religious freedom.