

EQUATORIAL GUINEA 2017 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 provides funds to the Catholic Church and its schools for educational programming. Catholic masses remained a normal part of official ceremonial functions. The law also 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.

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials, including the MJRAPI director general of religion, to discuss the ability of individuals to practice any religion free of discrimination. Embassy staff members also met with the Imam for Malabo and the respective presidents of the evangelical and Pentecostal communities to discuss their experiences as nondominant religious denominations operating in country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the country's total population at 778,000 (July 2017 estimate). The most recent local census, conducted in 2015 in collaboration with the United Nations, puts the total population at 1.2 million. According to the most recent 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). The remaining 5 percent adhere to animism, the Bahai Faith, and other beliefs.

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 the country has no national religion and individuals are free to change religions. Christians converting to Islam are permitted to add Muslim names to their Christian names on their official documents.

Regulations establish an official preference for the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea. Neither group is required to register with the MJRAPI. The only religious group to receive state funding for operating educational institutions is the Roman Catholic Church.

Some long-standing religious groups such as Methodists, Muslims, and Bahais 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 religion. 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 100,000 Central African francs (CFA) (\$180). The director general of religion 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 pre-authorization 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.

All foreigners, including foreign evangelical missionaries, are required to obtain residency permits to remain in the country.

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

Government Practices

While the government routinely granted religious groups permission for 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. All religious groups, including a small number of Bahai and Jewish groups, were allowed to hold services as long as they finished before 9 p.m. and did not disturb the peace. Evangelical Christian groups continued to hold activities outside the prescribed period with no repercussions from law enforcement. Religious leaders said authorities routinely issued permits for proselytism and door-to-door proselytism occurred without incident.

Evangelical Christians reported residency permits were prohibitively expensive at 400,000 CFA (\$700), 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.

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

Catholic masses were a normal part of all major ceremonial functions, such as National Day on October 12 and the President's Birthday on June 5. Catholic

leaders were the only religious leaders to meet publicly with government officials. Catholic and Reformed Church leaders were often seated in preferred locations at official functions.

On April 2, Minister of Justice, Religious Affairs, and Penitentiary Institutions Evangelina Filomena Oyo Ebule opened celebrations to mark the National Day of Prayer, which included representatives from all major faiths. In her speech, the minister emphasized the need of all religious faiths to continue to work together to promote peace and security.

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 that it was expected that they attend the president's birthday Mass at the Catholic Church.

Unlike in previous years, the government allowed the Islamic community to celebrate the festival of Eid al-Adha in the Malabo Stadium. Hundreds of Muslims gathered in the stadium from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. on September 4.

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

U.S. embassy officials met with the director general of religion to discuss religious freedom and the ability of individuals to practice any religion free of discrimination.

The embassy also met with the Imam for Malabo, the Archbishop of Malabo, evangelical Christian pastors, Protestant leaders, and a representative of the Bahai Faith to acquire 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.