

BENIN 2018 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. In February and March President Patrice Talon met with leaders of the Catholic Church, the Protestant Methodist Church of Benin (EPMB), the Islamic Union of Benin (UIB), and the Group of the Evangelical Church Association of Benin (CAEEB) to discuss government reforms and ways to defuse social discord.

Bishop Antoine Sabi Bio donated furniture, teaching materials, and hardware to private French-Arabic primary and secondary schools in the city of Natitingou and stated that among the aims was to encourage interreligious dialogue.

Embassy staff met with representatives from various religious groups to discuss their roles in promoting interreligious dialogue within the country. Embassy officials met with imams and Quranic teachers during visits to mosques and Quranic schools in the predominantly Muslim north. The Ambassador donated foodstuffs to the Muslim community at Ramadan and conveyed a message of religious tolerance. The Ambassador hosted an iftar with leaders from various religious groups during which she highlighted the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.3 million (July 2018 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 smaller religious groups include Methodists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Baptists, Pentecostals, the Family Federation of World Peace and Unification, 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. The few Shia Muslims are primarily 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 and Public Security 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.

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 (\$88). If a group is not registered, the Ministry of Interior orders 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

Observers stated that religious groups continued to hold political influence and their influence extended into other aspects of society. Local politicians regularly sought the support of religious leaders in addressing social issues. President Talon met with leaders of the Catholic Church on February 7, the Protestant Methodist Church of Benin (EPMB) on February 14, the Islamic Union of Benin (UIB) on

February 22, and the Group of the Evangelical Church Association of Benin (CAEEB) on March 1. During these meetings, the leaders discussed government reforms and ways to defuse social discord triggered by a labor dispute involving the health, justice, and education sectors. Each religious group proposed solutions for defusing the social crisis.

Authorities released on bail four detained priests of the Baname Church charged with manslaughter. The priests were charged and jailed following a 2017 incident in which five followers of the Baname Church died from asphyxiation and several were hospitalized after church leaders told followers to shut themselves in their prayer rooms and burn incense and charcoal. Bail for the detainees ranged from 10 to 20 million CFA francs (\$17,600 to \$35,200) and the case remained pending at year's end.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On February 12, Bishop Sabi Bio of Natitingou in the northwest donated furniture, teaching materials, and hardware to private French-Arabic primary and secondary schools in the city. The bishop stated the donation aimed to contribute to students' educations and to encourage interreligious dialogue.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with representatives of religious groups and encouraged religious tolerance. Embassy officials met with the President of the Group of the Evangelical Church Association of Benin and the Secretary General of the Islamic Union of Benin on March 20 and May 3, respectively, to discuss their roles in nation building and to share views on interreligious dialogue in the country. The embassy encouraged them to continue their activities promoting interreligious tolerance and understanding. On July 31, the Ambassador met with the imam of a large mosque in Cotonou and discussed ways to promote continued productive relations among the country's various religious groups, and between these groups and the country's government.

On June 4-7, the Ambassador and other embassy officials visited three mosques and two Quranic schools in the predominantly Muslim north, in the towns of Nikki, Parakou, and Perere. The embassy delegation met with imams, members of mosque congregations, and Quranic teachers. The Ambassador expressed the U.S. commitment to advancing religious tolerance.

On June 11, the Ambassador hosted an iftar with religious leaders from various religious groups during which she delivered remarks highlighting the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom and respect for religious diversity. During Ramadan, the Ambassador also donated foodstuffs to the Muslim community and conveyed a message of religious tolerance.