EQUATORIAL GUINEA 2018 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, such as the nation's Independence Day. 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. On December 17, the MJRAPI convened a meeting with representatives of all major religious groups in which the attorney general announced plans to reassess the religious group authorization process and possibly develop new regulations that would allow the ministry to more closely monitor, assess, and support religious groups. This meeting followed a Ministry of Education inspector's visit to a public school in which he saw Jehovah's Witness children refuse to sing the national anthem, in accordance with their religious beliefs.

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 director general of religious affairs, to discuss religious freedom. Embassy staff members also met with the Imam for Malabo and the Catholic Archbishop of Malabo. They met as well with the respective presidents of the evangelical Christian and Pentecostal communities to discuss their experiences as minority religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 779,000 (July 2018 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). The remaining 5 percent adhere to animism, the Baha'i Faith, Judaism, and other beliefs. Most of the Muslim population are 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. 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 100,000 Central African francs (CFA) ($170). 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.

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 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. All religious groups, including a small number of Baha'i 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.

Evangelical Christians reported residency permits were prohibitively expensive at 400,000 CFA francs ($660) 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 National Day on October 12 and the President's Birthday 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 again allowed the Muslim community to celebrate Eid al-Adha in Malabo Stadium. Hundreds of Muslims participated.

In accordance with the parliament's approval of a law in September 2017 making the National Day of Prayer an annual event to be celebrated on the first Sunday in April, religious groups again marked the event. In contrast with the previous year, there was no official government representation.

In early December an inspector from the Ministry of Education observed Jehovah's Witnesses children at a public school in the remote district of Nsok Nsomo, Ebibeyin Province, who refused to sing the national anthem, in accordance with their religious beliefs. The Department of Religious Affairs under the Ministry of Justice then requested a meeting with representatives of every principal religious group. The invitation letter asked the representatives to bring their holy writings and a summary of their beliefs. After the religious groups submitted their documentation to the director general of religious affairs at the December 17 meeting, the attorney general informed the religious groups that the government planned to reassess the entire religious group authorization process. He stated the Department of Religious Affairs was considering drafting new regulations so it could properly monitor and assess religious groups' needs in order to be a better resource. The attorney general did not refer to the incident with the Jehovah's Witnesses children.

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 religious affairs to discuss religious freedom and tolerance.

Embassy officials also met with the Imam for Malabo, the Catholic Archbishop of Malabo, evangelical Christian pastors, Protestant leaders, 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.