

GUINEA-BISSAU 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes the separation of religion and state and the responsibility of the state to respect and protect legally recognized religious groups. The governor of Gabu Region expressed concerns about signs of “stricter” Islamic practices and recommended the central government take action.

Media reported imams’ concerns about the increase in Salafist Quranic schools, new mosques with “unvetted” imams, online recruitment of youth to religious radicalism, and the threat that these developments posed to the country’s tradition of religious tolerance.

U.S. diplomats met with high-level government officials as well as leaders of various religious communities to promote religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.8 million (July 2018 estimate). Estimates of the religious composition of the population vary widely, but according to a 2010 study by the Pew Research Center, approximately 45 percent is Muslim, 31 percent follows indigenous religious practices, and 22 percent is Christian. There are small communities of Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews, many of whom are foreign citizens.

The Fula (Peuhl or Fulani) and Mandinka (Malinke) ethnic groups are the most numerous followers of Islam. Muslims generally live in the north and northeast, and most Muslims are Sunni; Shia communities exist as well. Adherents of indigenous religious beliefs generally live in all but the northern parts of the country. The Christian population, including Roman Catholics and Protestants, is primarily from the Pepel, Manjaco, and Balanta ethnic groups and is concentrated in Bissau and along the coast. Catholics represent more than half of the Christian population, while Brazilian Protestant and other Protestant denominations maintain a significant number of congregations and missions throughout the country. Large numbers of Muslims and Christians hold indigenous beliefs as well.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates the state shall be separate from religious institutions and shall respect and protect legally recognized religious groups whose activities shall be subject to the law. It holds freedom of conscience and religion as inviolable, even if the state declares a state of siege, and provides for freedom of worship as long as it does not violate the fundamental principles cited in the constitution. It establishes that all citizens are equal under the law with the same rights and obligations, irrespective of their religion. Political parties and labor unions are barred from affiliating with a particular religious group. The constitution recognizes the freedom of religious groups to teach their faith.

The government requires religious groups to obtain licenses. The formal process, which is not often followed, entails providing the name, location, type, and size of the organization to the Ministry of Justice. Under the law, religious groups are recognized as associations and benefit from tax exemptions.

In accordance with the constitution, there is no religious instruction in public schools. The Ministry of Education regulates and enforces the decree against religious teaching in public schools. There are some private schools operated by religious groups.

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

Government Practices

In October the governor of Gabu Region expressed concern about “increased signs of stricter Islamic practices” in that region, influenced by immigrants from the Republic of Guinea. The governor recommended the intervention of the central government to increase vigilance over activities associated with Islam.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some Muslim community members reported continuing concerns about what they termed “stricter” Islamic practices taught by foreign imams to the local Muslim population. Media reported imams’ concerns about the increase in Salafist Quranic schools, new mosques with “unvetted” imams, online recruitment of youth to religious radicalism, and the threat these developments posed to the country’s tradition of religious tolerance.

Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic leaders continued to hold meetings during the year to discuss the long-running political crisis affecting the country and continued to engage with political leaders in an attempt to resolve the impasse. Different religious groups also promoted respect for other religions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The United States directs its engagement in the country from the U.S. Embassy in Dakar, Senegal.

In April the U.S. Ambassador met the bishop of the Roman Catholic diocese of Bissau to discuss the role of the Church and religious leaders in solving the political crisis. In June the U.S. Ambassador met with representatives of the National Union of Imams and Muslim community in Bissau to celebrate the end of Ramadan.