

BENIN 2019 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. On February 15, President Patrice Talon led a meeting to reconcile dissenting factions in the leadership of the Islamic Union of Benin.

On September 29, local press reported that a group of unidentified individuals demolished the Ministry of Awakening Church in Parakou following a dispute about noise during church services. The church pastor and some followers had previously attacked and beaten a magistrate who had filed a noise complaint. Police responded to the scene and opened an investigation into the attack, but as of year's end had not identified or arrested the perpetrators.

The Ambassador held a roundtable with leaders of various religious groups during which she and the roundtable participants discussed ways to build stronger interfaith relationships among the country's religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.7 million (midyear 2019 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 for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), 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 (\$86). If a group is not registered, the Ministry of Interior may order 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

On April 15, President Talon convened a meeting at the presidential palace in Cotonou to facilitate the reconciliation of the leadership of the Islamic Union of Benin. This followed the convening in late March of two separate congresses by members of the governing bureau of the Islamic Union, resulting in a split into two factions. At the conclusion of the presidential meeting, the dissenting members of the governing bureau shook hands and pledged to end the disagreement that undermined the union and to maintain harmony within the union. They issued a joint public statement expressing gratitude to President Talon for his effort to resolve the conflict.

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 religious events upon request.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On September 29, local press reported that a group of unidentified individuals demolished the Ministry of Awakening, an evangelical Christian church in Parakou in the northeastern part of the country, following a dispute over noise during church services. On September 9, the pastor and members of the church reportedly beat and seriously injured a magistrate who lived next to the Ministry of Awakening and had gone to the church to complain about noise during church services. The attackers fled when the police arrived on the scene. Police opened an investigation into the attack but as of year's end had not identified or arrested the perpetrators. The magistrate had previously filed a noise complaint with the prosecutor at the court of Parakou, and the police had reportedly warned the pastor about the complaint of excessive noise.

From January 18 to January 25, members of the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Methodist Church participated in a series of joint events, including prayer sessions and a parade in the city of Porto-Novo to foster interfaith dialogue.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials met with representatives of religious groups and encouraged religious tolerance. On July 17, the Ambassador held a roundtable with leaders of Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious groups. The roundtable discussion focused on the future of religious freedom in the country and how to build stronger interfaith relationships within the religious community. The Ambassador stressed the need to protect religious freedom and encouraged the country's interfaith community to foster religious acceptance and peace.