

BENIN 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes a secular state and provides for freedom of religious thought, expression, and practice. The law bans forms of expression that incite discrimination, hatred, or violence against an individual or a group of people based on their religion. The law also bans any expression – including religious sermons – that infringes on the values and symbols of the state. All religious groups must register with the government. Government officials at the department and municipal levels have the authority to issue orders suspending certain types of religious practice to maintain peace. Police officials said they intervened in religious affairs primarily when there was a “disruption of public order.” Religious leaders called for social peace ahead of the April 11 presidential election in which many political parties were deemed ineligible to participate and also engaged in mediation efforts to resolve the political crisis which resulted in the arrests of political opponents.

On September 6, a former priest of the Christian Church of Baname, Jean Claude Assogba, sent a letter to government authorities, diplomatic missions, and trade unions to denounce what he said were several abuses committed by the leadership of that church against followers, including fraud and physically harmful and occult practices. As of year’s end, neither church leadership nor the government had responded to Assogba’s letter.

Embassy officials raised religious tolerance issues with government officials from the Ministries of Justice, Social Affairs, and Interior as well as mayors of several communes. Embassy representatives regularly spoke with leaders of religious groups, including Muslim, Celestial Christian, Catholic, evangelical Christian, Voodoo, and other leaders in cities throughout the country to promote religious freedom and tolerance. Throughout the year, the embassy also engaged with religious leaders in conducting its development activities and as part of its ongoing outreach to civil society organizations. Embassy representatives also consulted regularly with practitioners and leaders from the Catholic, Celestial Christian, Muslim, Voodoo, and evangelical Christian communities on human rights issues.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 13.3 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2013 census (the most recent), 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 the Celestial Church of Christ, with 6.7 percent. Other 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 as Christian or Muslim also practice Voodoo or other traditional religions.

Most Muslims reside in northern regions. There are some Shia Muslims, and most are foreign residents. Residents in the north report the presence of Tablighi Muslim adherents. Southern regions are predominantly inhabited by Christians.

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 law bans any expression – including religious sermons – that infringes on the values and symbols of the state.

The Ministry of Interior has the authority to deploy the national 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. Local department and municipal leaders may also issue orders limiting religious practice to maintain public order.

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 law bans online or written material, game shows, and other programs made public by journalists, editors, or printers that incite hatred or violence for religious purposes. The law also imposes fines between 1,000,000 CFA francs (\$1,700) and 5,000,000 CFA francs (\$8,600) for individuals guilty of defamation for the purpose of inciting hatred against a group of people based on their religion using written press, audiovisual media, or printed materials.

The Digital Code criminalizes use of electronic means to incite discrimination, hatred, or violence against an individual or a group of people based on their religion. Those found guilty may receive a one-year prison sentence and a fine of up to 1,000,000 CFA francs (\$1,700).

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

Government Practices

According to the Ministry of Interior's Director of Internal Affairs and Religion, the primary catalyst for government involvement in religious affairs remained "disruption of public order." For example, according to an evangelical Christian church leader, police intervened in several disputes between Voodoo and Christian followers over Voodoo practices that included animal sacrifices, initiation ceremonies, and idolatry.

Religious groups remained active in resolving the political discord that resulted from a 2020 electoral crisis. On January 26, President Patrice Talon met with a delegation from the Episcopal Conference of Benin, representing the Catholic Church, to discuss the April 11, 2021 presidential election. The delegation encouraged the government and political parties to engage in a peaceful, inclusive, democratic, and transparent dialogue ahead of the election.

Religious leaders from the Orthodox churches, the Cherubim and Seraphim Churches, the Mariavite Church, and the African Methodist Church of Benin, under the umbrella of Benin's National Council of Ecumenical Churches, published a message on January 29 calling for social peace during the electoral process and an inclusive and fair presidential election.

To limit the spread of COVID-19, the government announced on September 1 restrictions on all cultural, festive, sporting, and religious events. At a press conference on September 2, government spokesperson Wilfried Hounbedji stated that places of worship were not affected by the restrictions. Hounbedji encouraged religious leaders, however, to raise awareness of the COVID-19 vaccine among their followers and to maintain COVID-19 prevention measures at places of worship.

Several religious events were cancelled due to COVID-19 limitations on large gatherings. Speaking on Traditional Religions' Day on January 10 in Ouidah, Minister of Culture Jean-Michel Abimbola stated that the government was not authorizing the usual large-scale religious celebrations because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Government officials continued to attend inductions, funerals, and other religious ceremonies organized by religious groups while observing COVID-19 prevention measures. 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 6, a former priest of the Christian Church of Baname, Jean Claude Assogba, sent a letter to government authorities, diplomatic missions, and trade unions to denounce what he said were abuses committed by Church leadership against its congregants. He said these abuses included fraud and occult practices such as selling beverages made of animal blood to followers, poor conditions for and ill-treatment of priests, and mysterious disappearances and poisoning of followers. Reports about his letter circulated widely on social media. In 2017, four leaders of the same Church were briefly detained on order of the Court of Porto-Novo after five congregants died following practices advised by Church leaders. As of year's end, neither the Church nor the government had addressed the latest allegations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials discussed religious tolerance issues with government officials from the Ministries of Justice, Social Affairs and Interior, as well as mayors of several communes.

Embassy representatives met with leaders of religious groups, including Muslim, Christian, Catholic, Voodoo, and others and promoted religious tolerance. Throughout the year, the embassy engaged with religious leaders in conducting its development activities and as part of its ongoing outreach to civil society organizations. Embassy representatives also consulted regularly with practitioners and leaders from the Catholic, Celestial Christian, Muslim, Voodoo, and evangelical Christian communities on human rights issues.

Embassy officials invited religious leaders of Christian, Muslim, and traditional groups to a human rights event on July 13 in Cotonou. Participants shared views on religious tolerance, and embassy officials discussed and encouraged religious tolerance and respect for minority groups' rights.