

# **COTE D'IVOIRE 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and worship, consistent with law and order, and prohibits religious discrimination. It emphasizes that religious tolerance is fundamental to the nation's unity, peace, reconciliation, and social cohesion and forbids speech that encourages religious hatred. Religious leaders partnered with local law enforcement and subnational government leadership on security matters to prevent violent extremism and protect their communities from the growing terrorist threat emanating from the Sahel. Minister of the Interior and Security General Vagondo Diomande said the June 12 investiture ceremony for the new president of the Supreme Council of Imams of Cote d'Ivoire (COSIM, the country's main Sunni Muslim association) was an opportunity for the promotion of "an Islam of love and tolerance." Diomande also said there was no Quranic basis for ideologies of hatred or death and that President Alassane Ouattara was counting on imams and preachers throughout the country to advocate for the practice of a peaceful form of Islam to help prevent violent extremism. In his investiture speech, new COSIM president Imam Ousmane Diakite also denounced violent extremism and stated Islam was a religion of tolerance, balance, and moderation. On July 27, returned former president Laurent Gbagbo, a Christian, met with President Ouattara, who is Muslim. During a Mass on August 1, Cardinal Jean Pierre Kutwa, Archbishop of Abidjan, said the Ouattara-Gbagbo meeting was a significant development for peace and reconciliation between the rival party leaders following the 2010-2011 post-electoral crisis, which resulted in approximately 3,000 deaths and 500,000 displaced persons, and the contentious, and sometimes violent, period surrounding the 2020 presidential election. According to Kutwa, although religion was not a driver of these disputes, many citizens looked to religious leaders to help reduce politically motivated conflict and guard against political manipulation of national identity, ethnicity, and religious differences to foment division in the country. Leaders from across the religious spectrum generally supported Gbagbo's return following his acquittal by the International Criminal Court of charges of crimes against humanity and the government's release of persons arrested for crimes allegedly committed around the 2020 presidential election, saying the releases were also necessary for peace and reconciliation. Government officials reported meeting with religious leaders to encourage them to raise awareness about COVID-19 mitigation measures with their followers. Religious leaders reported collaborating with the government to have mobile units administer COVID-19

vaccinations and offer national identity card registration at some places of worship. As in past years, the government funded pilgrimages to Christian holy sites; it did not fund pilgrimages for Muslims to Saudi Arabia, however, because of Saudi COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Muslim and Christian leaders, including representatives of COSIM and the evangelical Christian, Methodist, and Catholic churches, reported generally good relations with each other and between their communities, although there were two reported instances of local Christian and Muslim groups disagreeing over the use of land for a mosque or a church. These religious leaders and civil society representatives stated that given the importance of religion in Ivoirian society, such leaders were seen as influential figures in maintaining peace, reconciling the country, and guarding against political manipulation of national identity, ethnicity, and religious differences to foment division in the country. Additionally, they noted leaders across the religious spectrum were broadly united in their desire to work together to accomplish these objectives. Some Muslim leaders stated their community took steps to prevent the influence of what they called intolerant forms of Islam in the country, including providing imams with suggested themes for sermons, advising imams to closely vet guest preachers before allowing them to give sermons in their mosques, and requiring traveling Muslim preachers to have their sermons approved in advance by local Muslim authorities.

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials to discuss the state of religious freedom and tolerance in the country, including asking whether the government had recorded any interreligious conflicts or threats to, violence against, or harassment of any specific religious groups; whether the government had penalized or denied benefits to any religious groups; and asking for the government's assessment of the threat of religiously motivated violent extremism in the country. The Ambassador and other embassy representatives met with religious leaders in the capital and around the country throughout the year. Embassy representatives hosted religious community leaders for roundtable discussions on issues that included religious tolerance and the status of relations between Christian and Muslim groups. Embassy representatives also met with the director of the nationwide Islamic radio network and television station, Al-Bayane, several times. Some discussions with the Al-Bayane director focused on the role of religious media outlets in promoting peace, social cohesion, and religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 28.1 million (midyear 2021). According to the most recent census in 2014, 42.9 percent of the population is Muslim and 33.9 percent Christian. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include adherents of indigenous and other religious beliefs. According to the census, 19.1 percent of the population identifies as following no religion. The government carried out a new census in November and December; however, as of the end of the year, the results had not been released. Many individuals who identify as Christian or Muslim also practice some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs.

Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Harrists (a group that follows the teachings of William Wade Harris, a Liberian who evangelized in Cote d'Ivoire in the early 20th century), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Southern Baptists, Greek Orthodox, Copts, the Celestial Church of Christ, and Assemblies of God. According to 2014 census data, 17.2 percent of the population is Catholic, 11.8 percent evangelical Christian, 1.7 percent Methodist, 0.5 percent Harrist, 0.4 percent Celeste, and 2.2 percent belongs to other Christian denominations. Muslim groups include Sunnis (95 percent of Muslims), many of whom are Sufi; Shia (mostly members of the Lebanese community); and Ahmadis. Adherents of other religious groups include Buddhists, Baha'is, Rastafarians, followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jews, and Bossonists, who follow traditions of the Akan ethnic group.

Muslims are the majority in the north of the country, and Christians are the majority in the south. Members of both groups, as well as other religious groups, reside throughout the country.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution stipulates a secular state that respects all beliefs and treats all individuals equally under the law, regardless of religion. It specifically prohibits religious discrimination in public and private employment and provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, and worship consistent with the law, the rights of others, national security, and public order. It prohibits "propaganda" that encourages religious hatred. It recognizes the right of political asylum in the country for individuals persecuted for religious reasons.

The Department of Faith-Based Organizations (DGC), which is part of the Ministry of Interior and Security, is charged with promoting dialogue among religious groups as well as between the government and religious groups, providing administrative support to religious groups attempting to become established in the country, monitoring religious activities, and managing state-sponsored religious pilgrimages and registration of new religious groups.

The law requires all religious groups to notify the government of their existence. Foreign religious groups with a presence in the country require authorization from the Minister of Interior and Security, and all religious groups – foreign and local – must register with the DGC. Whether a religious group is categorized as local or foreign is based on the nationality of its members, the source of its funding, the make-up of its executive board, and the location of its head office. Groups with 75 percent foreign membership, foreign funding, foreign board members, or a foreign head office are considered foreign. Local religious groups are allowed to operate two months without official approval after they submit their registration application. Foreign religious groups are technically not allowed to begin operating until they receive authorization, but this is not enforced.

There are no penalties prescribed for groups that do not register, but registered groups benefit from government support, such as free access to state-run television and radio for religious programming if requested. Registered religious groups are not charged import duties on devotional items, such as religious books or rosaries. Registered religious groups are also exempt from property tax on the places of worship they own. Nonregistered groups are not allowed to sue for damages or receive compensation for injuries suffered.

To register, a group must submit an application to the DGC that includes its bylaws, names of the founding members and board members, date of founding, and general assembly minutes. The DGC investigates the group to ensure it has no members or purpose deemed politically subversive and that no members have been judicially deprived of their civil and political rights.

There are legal penalties for threatening violence or death via an “information system.” This definition includes print and electronic media. When such a threat is of a “racist, xenophobic, religious, or ethnic [nature] or refers to a group characterized by race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin,” the law provides for a prison term of 10 to 20 years and a fine of 20 million to 40 million CFA francs (\$34,400-\$68,700). Additionally, defamation, insults, or threats made towards a group of people who belong to a certain race, ethnicity, or religion are

punishable by a prison term of five to 10 years and a fine of 500,000 to five million CFA francs (\$860-\$8,600).

Religious education is not included in the public school curriculum but is often included in private schools affiliated with a particular faith. Religious groups running those schools normally provide opt-out procedures. Teachers and supervisory staff in religiously affiliated schools must participate in training offered by the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training before the school receives accreditation from the ministry. The government provides some funding to both secular and religious primary private schools pursuant to legal conventions between the government and these schools. Subsidies are paid on a per student basis and the rate per student is the same for secular and religious schools.

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

### **Government Practices**

In recent years, al-Qaida affiliate Jamat'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) based in the Sahel region has expanded into the northern part of the country from the Sahel, and JNIM sub-group Katiba Macina, also known as the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), launched several attacks on the country's security forces during the year, some fatal. Government and civil society sources expressed concern that these groups and others would continue to increase their presence in the country and recruit from vulnerable populations, such as unemployed youth. To counter this threat, religious leaders partnered with local law enforcement and subnational government leadership on security matters to prevent violent extremism and protect their communities from what they stated was the growing terrorist threat.

In April, following the unexpected death of COSIM President Mamadou Traore and his replacement by Imam Ousmane Diakite, Minister of the Interior and Security Diomande, representing President Ouattara, said at Diakite's June 12 investiture that Diakite's appointment presented an opportunity for the promotion of "an Islam of love and tolerance." Diomande also said there was no Quranic basis for ideologies of hatred or death and said the President was counting on imams and preachers throughout the country to advocate the practice of a peaceful form of Islam to help prevent violent extremism. In his investiture speech, Diakite, like Diomande, denounced violent extremism and stated Islam was a religion of tolerance, balance, and moderation. On June 18, Prime Minister Patrick Achi

visited Diakite and noted that Diakite's "human qualities, his wisdom, his calm, his discretion, (and) his open-mindedness reassure us that [not only] the country but also the Muslim community is in good hands."

In March, former president Gbagbo was definitively acquitted by the International Criminal Court of crimes against humanity during the 2010-2011 post-electoral crisis. The government paid for his return to the country in June. Gbagbo, a former evangelical Christian, announced his renewed commitment to Catholicism during a public Mass on June 20. On July 27, in what was widely reported in the media as a step towards peace and gesture of reconciliation, he met with President Ouattara, who was his rival in the 2010 presidential election. During a Mass on August 1 attended by Prime Minister Achi, Cardinal Kutwa said the Ouattara-Gbagbo meeting was a significant development for peace and political reconciliation between the rival party leaders following the 2010-2011 crisis (which resulted in approximately 3,000 deaths and 500,000 displaced persons) and the contentious and sometimes violent period surrounding the 2020 presidential election. According to Kutwa, although religion was not a driver of these disputes, many citizens looked to religious leaders to help reduce politically motivated conflict and guard against political manipulation of national identity, ethnicity, and religious differences to foment division in the country. Regarding the Ouattara-Gbagbo meeting, Kutwa invited all Ivoirians to follow the two leaders' example and stated "there is a time for war and a time for peace. The time for peace has arrived."

Leaders from across the religious spectrum generally supported Gbagbo's return and the government's release of persons arrested for crimes allegedly committed around the 2020 presidential election, saying the releases were also necessary for peace and political reconciliation. Civil society organizations reported that some religious leaders privately petitioned government officials on these issues.

Leaders of one Christian denomination said they had generally positive working relationships with the government, but they also said that some government officials continued to believe that members of certain religions denominations were automatically loyal to specific political figures. In this case, the leaders said, the stereotype persisted that certain Christian denominations were loyal to opposition parties. The leaders of this religious group stated that this was not the case, and that the denomination had no political loyalties.

Government officials reported meeting with religious leaders to encourage them to raise awareness about COVID-19 mitigation measures with their followers.

Religious leaders reported collaborating with the government to have mobile units administer COVID-19 vaccinations and offer national identity card registration at some places of worship. The National Forum of Religious Denominations, which comprises Muslim and Christian members, said that at the request of the government, it carried out awareness-raising activities in December to encourage participation in the national census. Muslim and Christian community groups in several parts of the country, including Yamoussoukro, Bouake, Beoumi, Daoukro, and Man, participated in community policing programs aimed at fostering interfaith collaboration to increase community safety.

As of early December, the DGC reported the government had funded pilgrimages to Lourdes, France for more than 200 Catholics and to Turkey for more than 450 evangelical Christians. The government also funded pilgrimages for more than 200 Catholics to certain religiously significant locations within the country, including in Abidjan, Issia, Diabo, Raviart, and Yamoussoukro. The government did not fund pilgrimages for Muslims to Saudi Arabia because of Saudi COVID-19 travel restrictions. In December, the director general of the DGC, Messamba Bamba, said in a newspaper interview that the government welcomed proposals for pilgrimages from all religious groups in the country.

The DGC said that when its representatives attended events organized by religious groups (e.g., ceremonies, conferences, and festivals), those representatives used speaking opportunities to exhort audiences to disseminate messages of peace and tolerance through all mediums of communication with the goal of promoting social cohesion.

The DGC stated that many unregistered local religious groups operated in the country, which it said was due to the group leaders' lack of knowledge or understanding of registration requirements. The DGC stated that when informed of the registration requirement, some religious leaders were puzzled, because they did not understand the purpose of the government's involvement in a personal matter like the practice of religion. The DGC said it had not identified any foreign religious groups operating without authorization. The DGC registered 186 new religious groups during the year. The DGC said it was not aware of any religious groups being denied or deferred registration during the year.

High ranking government officials met with religious leaders and attended religious events throughout the year. In April, shortly after his appointment, Prime Minister Achi visited Cardinal Kutwa, and in a traditional ceremonial gesture, asked for Kutwa's blessing as he embarked on his new position in the government.

Achi said the government benefited from exchanges with major religious leaders because these leaders could provide insight on the national mood, given their close connection to the population. Sources stated that Prime Minister Achi's visit was significant, given Kutwa's August 2020 criticism of President Ouattara's decision to run for a third term, which sparked a rebuke from Catholic cabinet ministers. Some commentators at the time suggested Kutwa's criticism showed he supported the opposition, although Kutwa denied having any political affiliation.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Leaders of a Christian denomination reported an instance in May in which denomination members were prevented from building a church on land they owned in a majority-Muslim community in the south-central part of the country. Local Muslims, mainly youths, opposed the project. According to the Christian leaders, Muslim community members had asked Christian landowners earlier to let them use the land for prayer; in order to maintain good relations with the town's Muslim community, the landowners agreed to allow this temporarily until they were ready to build their church. The Christian landowners said they understood that Muslims would pray on the land without constructing a mosque, as Muslims often prayed in locations other than mosques. The Christian leaders said that after they allowed the Muslims to use the land, the latter began building a mosque on the site and refused to leave when asked to do so. The landowners contacted the community imam, who said he had not instructed his congregants to build the mosque, but he took no action to remove them from the land. The landowners then petitioned the mayor (locally elected), the prefect and subprefect (regional representatives of the central government), and the DGC for assistance. All initially said they could not help. The mayor ultimately convened the landowners and local Muslim leaders and offered to give the landowners a different parcel of land in a more remote section of the community to build a church. The Christian leaders said the landowners accepted this offer and ceded their original parcel of land to the Muslim community to maintain positive relations with the community. The mosque remained on the land. The Christian leaders said they did not report the issue to the press because they did not want to harm the group's generally good relations with the Muslim community.

The leaders of the same Christian denomination reported a second incident in the central part of the country with the same basic circumstances – Muslims occupied a parcel of land owned by Christians and constructed a mosque, thus preventing Christians from building a planned church. The landowners petitioned local

government officials for assistance to mediate the dispute; the prefect offered the Christians another parcel of land, but, as of December, the dispute was unresolved.

Religious leaders and civil society representatives again stated that leaders across the religious spectrum were broadly united in their desire to work toward peace and reconciliation following the 2010-2011 post-electoral crisis and the upheaval surrounding the 2020 presidential election.

Imam Djiguiba Cisse, a member of COSIM's leadership, the chief imam at a major Abidjan mosque, and the director of the nationwide Islamic radio network and television station Al-Bayane, stated that he continued to have strong relationships with Christian leaders. He noted that COSIM met with Catholic leaders during the year to build support for officially forming and registering a multifaith platform called the Alliance of Religions for Peace, which previously operated informally. Two weeks prior to the 2020 presidential election, the alliance held a national interfaith prayer for peace and social cohesion in Abidjan. The country continued to host several other multifaith organizations dedicated to peace and social cohesion, including the National Forum of Religious Denominations. Between January and November, forum delegations visited several locations across the country to encourage social cohesion, peace, and reconciliation, invoking both Biblical and Quranic verses in support of peaceful coexistence when addressing audiences.

Leaders of the country's interdenominational evangelical association, the Federation of Evangelical Churches of Côte d'Ivoire, said they had good relations with leaders of the country's major religions. A Catholic priest serving as spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Abidjan expressed similar sentiments and noted a July conference organized by Muslim and Catholic journalists' associations in which leaders of both faiths stressed the importance of communication among different religious groups. Minister of National Reconciliation Kouadio Konan Bertin attended the conference and, in his remarks, said the journalists should assist the government in its mission to reconcile the country. Bertin thanked the associations for working together to promote friendship and cooperation among religions. He also noted the power of language and suggested the journalists, through their reporting, could help maintain peace. A Methodist leader said the Abidjan Methodist community held an annual prayer session with the Catholic community and noted that Methodist leaders regularly met with other faith leaders, including Muslims and Baptists. A leader of the country's small Jewish community said the community had warm relations with other religious groups, including Muslims. Christian and Muslim leaders in the

northern part of the country reported generally good relations. Some community radio stations reported reserving airtime for different religious groups to conduct prayers on Fridays and Sundays.

According to religious leaders and civil society organizations, numerous individuals regularly celebrated each other's religious holidays by attending household or neighborhood gatherings and religious ceremonies, regardless of their own faith. Muslim and Christian leaders in Korhogo, for example, noted that adherents of the two religions sang, danced, and prayed together on certain occasions and invited each other to religious events.

Some Muslim leaders continued to state that their community took steps to prevent the influence of what they called intolerant forms of Islam in the country. Specifically, they referred to adherents who disparaged any who did not follow their specific interpretation of Islam. These steps included providing imams with suggested themes for sermons and advising imams to closely vet guest preachers before allowing them to give sermons in their mosques. Community leaders in the north of the country reported that some communities required traveling Muslim preachers to have their proposed sermons approved by village authorities before giving them in village mosques. Muslim leaders in the north reported that, in a break from tradition, some imams no longer offered temporary shelter in mosques to male travelers not known to their communities out of fear these travelers might have ties to terrorist or criminal groups.

Government sources and civil society leaders said that religiously based hate speech sometimes was used on social media, but they stated that influential political and religious leaders did not use such language. A nongovernmental organization that tracks online hate speech in the country said cases of religiously based hate speech were rare.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy officials discussed the state of religious freedom and tolerance in the country with government officials. Specifically, embassy officials met with the DGC and discussed, among other topics, if the government had recorded interreligious conflicts or threats to, violence against, or harassment of any specific religious groups; whether the government had penalized or denied benefits to any religious groups; and the government's assessment of the threat of religiously motivated violent extremism in the country. The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with senior Christian and Muslim religious leaders, including in cities

and towns in the country's center (Bouake) and north (Korhogo and Ferkessedougou). Embassy representatives convened religious community leaders for roundtable discussions on issues that included religious tolerance and the status of relations between Christian and Muslim groups. A senior embassy official attended the investiture of the new COSIM president. Embassy officers also met regularly with the director of media network Al-Bayane, affiliated with COSIM, to discuss the role of religious media in promoting peace, social cohesion, and religious freedom.

In December, the Ambassador met separately with leaders of the Federation of Evangelical Churches of Côte d'Ivoire and Cardinal Kutwa. In the meetings, the leaders stated that religious freedom and tolerance continued to be the cultural norm in the country. In June, the Ambassador was the first foreign envoy to meet with the newly elected President of COSIM, who later paid him a return visit. Throughout the year, embassy officials met with representatives from the Muslim, Evangelical Christian, Methodist, Catholic, and Jewish communities. Topics included these religious groups' relations with the government, the role of religious leaders in promoting peace and reconciliation, relations between different religious groups, and the status of religious freedom and tolerance in the country.