

# **EQUATORIAL GUINEA 2021 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 there is no national religion, but by decree and practice, the government gives preference to the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea, which are the largest religious groups and the only ones not required to register their organization or activities with the Ministry of Justice, Religious Affairs, and Penitentiary Institutions (MJRAPI). In February, the MJRAPI applied a new regulation on faith-based institutions that requires all evangelical Christian missionaries and leaders to submit a theological certificate (educational credentials or proof of their religious qualifications) in order for their religious groups to continue operating in the country. According to an evangelical leader, the new regulation was intended to restrict unregistered evangelical institutions. Evangelical Christians continued to report that residency permits were prohibitively expensive, leading some missionaries to risk the consequences of not obtaining or renewing their permits.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom during the year.

The Ambassador met with government officials, including the MJRAPI minister, to discuss the importance of religious freedom and respect for human rights. Embassy staff members met with the Catholic Archbishop of Malabo, the presidents of the evangelical Christian and Pentecostal communities, and members of the Muslim and Baha'i communities to discuss their experiences as minority religious groups and religious tolerance in the country. With the Christian leaders, embassy officials also discussed the new certificate requirement.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 857,000 (midyear 2021). The most recent local census, conducted in 2015, estimates the total population at 1.2 million. According to the most recent government estimate from 2015, 88 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 5 percent Protestant. Many Christians reportedly practice some aspects of traditional indigenous religions as well. Two percent of the population is Muslim, mainly Sunni, according to the

2015 census. Most of the Muslim population consists of expatriates from West Africa. The remaining 5 percent adhere to animism, the Baha'i Faith, Judaism, or other beliefs.

## **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. By law, Christians converting to Islam are permitted to add Muslim names to their Christian names on their official documents.

Neither the Catholic Church nor the Protestant Reformed Church of Equatorial Guinea, the two largest religious groups in the country, are required to register with the MJRAPI. The only religious group to receive state funding for operating educational institutions is the Catholic Church.

Some longstanding religious groups, such as Methodists, Muslims, and Baha'is, hold permanent government 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. Groups seeking to register must supply detailed information about the leadership (e.g., curriculum vitae) and membership of the group, construction plans for religious buildings, property ownership documents, accreditations, and a mission statement from the religious organization's headquarters, and must pay a fee of 500,000 Central African francs (CFA francs) (\$860). 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 proselytizing.

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 ministry. 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 lead or speak at religious activities, but such

permission is not required simply to attend services. The MJRAPI permission is usually granted for the duration of the foreign religious representative's visit to the country. 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.

There are several Catholic schools. 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.

Most foreigners, including foreign evangelical Christian missionaries, are required to obtain residency permits to remain in the country. Catholic missionaries are exempt from the residency permit requirement.

By law, the National Day of Prayer, usually celebrated on the first Sunday in April, is an annual event.

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

### **Government Practices**

In February, the MJRAPI applied a new regulation requiring all evangelical Christian missionaries and leaders, including those previously approved, to submit their theological certificates (i.e., educational credentials or proof of their religious qualifications) as a requirement for their religious groups to continue operating in the country. This resulted in the dissolution of several unregistered evangelical Christian groups, which, according to sources, at least one evangelical leader believed was the underlying intent of the new rule. Some evangelical Christian leaders said privately that the new regulation discriminated against them, since it was not applied to all religious groups. Government officials said the new regulation had been imposed because many evangelical Christian churches had been involved in community scandals or were not respecting the norms for

religious practice established by the MJRAPI. The new regulation did not apply to the Catholic Church or the Reformed Church.

During the year, the government increased the price of registration of religious groups from 100,000 to 500,000 CFA francs (\$170 to \$860), and some religious groups were granted exceptions by the government and allowed to reregister every two years instead of annually.

While the government continued routinely to grant permission for religious groups to hold activities outside of places of worship, with the exception of 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. Authorities permitted all religious groups, including a small number of Baha'i and Jewish groups, to hold services as long as they finished before 9 p.m. and did not disturb the peace. Evangelical Christian groups stated they continued to hold activities in places of worship outside the prescribed hours with no repercussions.

Evangelical Christians continued to report that residency permits (which are separate from group registration permits) were prohibitively expensive at 400,000 CFA francs (\$690) for a two-year period, leading some missionaries to risk the consequences of not obtaining or renewing their permits. Local police reportedly enforced the requirement with threats of deportation and requested a small bribe as an alternative. There were no deportations reported. While the residency permit fee for foreign missionaries was the same as for all other foreigners, if the missionary coordinated with the MJRAPI and was part of a religious group present in the country since independence, a residency permit could be obtained for free, provided applicants could prove their missionary status, meet the new requirement to submit a theological certificate, and pass the requisite security checks. Catholic missionaries did not require residency permits to remain in the country.

Catholic masses remained a normal part of all major ceremonial functions and were held, for example, on Independence Day (October 12) and the President's Birthday holiday (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 that it was expected that they attend major events such as the President's Birthday Mass at nearby Catholic churches.

The government again did not allow the Muslim community to celebrate Eid al-Adha in Malabo Stadium due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

The National Day of Prayer celebration was again held online due to the pandemic.

### **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**

The Ambassador met with government officials, including the MJRAPI minister, to discuss the importance of religious freedom, efforts to promote religious tolerance, and respect for human rights

Embassy officials also spoke with the Catholic Archbishop of Malabo, evangelical Christian pastors, Protestant leaders, and representatives of the Muslim and Baha'i 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.

Renovation of the Batete Catholic Church – a project developed in 2019 with funding from the embassy, a U.S. oil company, and the national government – continued to be delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic.