

GUINEA-BISSAU 2021 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. It states that all citizens are equal under the law, with the same rights and obligations irrespective of their religion, and it recognizes the freedom of religious groups to teach their faith. In April, President Umaro Sissoco Embalo discontinued the government's prior practice of providing financial support for food following Ramadan. In May, local police injured village protesters in the Bafata region while attempting to enforce a day of prayer established by a regional government authority. In July, the Ministry of Public Administration set a prayer date for Eid al-Adha and declared the date to be a national holiday. Some religious leaders said they regarded this action as government interference in Islamic affairs. Some Islamic and Christian religious leaders commented on a Pentecostal church they believed to be promoting division, intolerance, and disrespect toward other religions. The government took no action against the church, although a Muslim leader said he reported his concerns about it to the Prime Minister and Interior Minister.

Religious leaders consistently stated that different ethnic and religious groups were still mostly respectful and tolerant of one another throughout the country. Some religious leaders, however, expressed concern regarding the spread of what they deemed religious extremism. A nongovernmental organization (NGO) highlighted the growth in the number of cases involving persons accused of witchcraft. It cited 50 known cases since 2019, including six in 2021 in which the accused person was killed. Religious leaders consistently identified better education as the most important factor in limiting the spread of religious extremism.

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 October, a visiting official from the Guinea-Bissau Liaison Office at the U.S. embassy in Dakar met separately with Muslim and Christian religious leaders in Bissau to discuss issues of tolerance and coexistence and their concern regarding the spread of religious extremism.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.0 million (midyear 2021). Estimates of the religious composition of the population vary widely, but according to the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project (2020), approximately 46 percent are Muslim, 31 percent follow indigenous religious practices, and 19 percent are Christian. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and those unaffiliated with any religious group.

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 drawn 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 so 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, religious instruction is not permitted in public schools. The Ministry of Education enforces this prohibition. There are some private schools operated by religious groups. Private schools must meet government-approved curriculum standards and receive Ministry of Education validation in order to grant nationally recognized diplomas or completion certificates. The government-approved curriculum standards require a broader base of conventional subjects, such as science and the Portuguese language, rather than a more limited curriculum of Arabic and Quranic studies, as offered in some Islamic schools.

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

Government Practices

Speaking at the inauguration ceremony of Special Adviser Luis Olivera Sanca on April 12, President Embaló said the government would no longer support the Muslim community with its traditional offering of rice and sugar during Ramadan. He indicated that Ramadan fasting was not included in the secular state's budget. Multiple religious leaders said that the President's position was unexpected and not popular within the Muslim community.

A religious leader reported that the Governor of Bafata declared a specific date in May following Ramadan to be a prayer day. All villages within the region reportedly complied except for the village of Contuboel, whose religious leaders selected a different date to conduct prayers. Local police forces intervened and clashed with youth from Contuboel, who disagreed with the date decreed by the governor. The religious leader reported that police injured multiple persons. Referring to the same incident, a news outlet reported that local police physically abused some inhabitants of a Bafata village when they tried to pray prior to the date proscribed by authorities. A few religious leaders said this was an isolated incident that was unlikely to occur again.

On July 13, the Ministry of Public Administration set the recitation of Eid al-Adha prayers for July 21 and declared that date a national holiday. A government spokesperson said the date was set after consultations with several Muslim religious organizations, including the National Union of the Imams of Guinea-Bissau. However, some religious leaders said they regarded the action as government interference in Islamic affairs. One religious leader said it was acceptable for the government to set the holiday but not to tell persons when to pray.

In October, some religious leaders said the government had not done enough to combat the threat of extremism. One Muslim leader said that a small but growing percentage of fundamentalist mosques and schools led by Quranic teachers financed by Islamists operating outside the country were potential incubators of radicalism that promoted ideas conflicting with the more moderate beliefs and traditions commonly found in most mosques in the country. Another Muslim leader said the government had failed to implement its declaration to transform Arabic-only schools into conventional schools of mixed education that would also include the teaching of Portuguese and secular subjects and provide students with a broader knowledge base to allow them to integrate into society.

Multiple Muslim and Catholic leaders said in October that an independent Pentecostal church, Igreja Assembleia de Deus, promoted division, intolerance, and disrespect toward other religions. One Muslim leader said he reported his concerns about the church to national authorities but that the government took no action. Religious leaders said this particular church attempted to provoke youth and destabilize peaceful relationships through broadcasts on Radio Luz, which is affiliated with Igreja Assembleia de Deus. Radio Luz accused other churches, for example, of being satanic or not adhering to the Bible. To maintain harmony in the religious community, the former Catholic bishop of Bissau encouraged the church to cease its behavior and its radio broadcasts. Religious leaders said the church continued to foment discord and discontent even after the bishop's intervention.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The NGO Human Rights League Guinea-Bissau (HRL) highlighted 50 reported instances of persons being accused of witchcraft since 2019. Of those, 20 resulted in deaths, with six killings reported in 2021, according to HRL. An HRL representative said that the trend during the past three years represented a substantial increase in cases and that there was a significant overlap between witchcraft and indigenous religious beliefs. HRL conducted research to determine why persons were being accused of witchcraft, and it promoted a campaign with religious leaders and village chiefs focused on training and capacity building. HRL also indicated that it was trying to raise awareness within the government, which had not introduced legislation related to witchcraft.

HRL indicated that its three main objectives included training qualified individuals who can train others to resist various forms of religious radicalization, gathering information to identify signs of religious extremism, and promoting a large

conference in Bissau on the issue. HRL further indicated that its local office was partnering on these initiatives with Chatham House in England and the Timbuktu Institute (African Center for Peace Studies) in Senegal.

Other religious leaders said that different ethnic and religious groups were still mostly respectful and tolerant of one another throughout the country. Some religious leaders, however, expressed concern regarding the spread of religious extremism. They identified education as the key mitigating factor to combat the spread of religious extremism, which they believed was a particular risk when young students traveled abroad and were exposed to what they said was a more radical practice of Islam. One leader stated that children must be taught at a young age to build a strong base of traditional beliefs before being tempted to go abroad, where their beliefs may be easily manipulated. This leader also emphasized the need to educate youth in modern schools, with a focus on teaching values that promote social and religious peace. Another individual assessed that Islamic schools offered only Arabic and Quranic studies, many of them connected to newly constructed mosques, and left students isolated from the rest of society. In response, he noted that his organization built a network of 12 conventional schools offering a government-approved curriculum.

One Muslim leader noted instances which, he said, highlighted religious tolerance, including examples of Muslim families who sent their sons to live with Christian families, in some cases for multiple years. In these instances, the Muslim sons continued to practice Islam while learning about a different culture and religion. The Muslim leader also said there were examples of children who attended conventional schools of different faiths while continuing to practice their own religion. The interim Bishop of Bissau indicated that Catholic schools accepted all students who met the basic criterion of having moral values. He said the Catholic Church wanted to provide an opportunity for all children to gain an education and to respect the values of different faiths.

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 there from the U.S. embassy in Dakar, Senegal. In October, a member of the Guinea-Bissau Liaison Office of the embassy in Dakar met with multiple Islamic and Catholic religious leaders in Bissau to discuss issues of tolerance and coexistence and their concern regarding the spread of religious extremism. Locally employed staff based in Bissau and three American diplomats

based at the embassy in Dakar maintained contact with multiple religious leaders, staff, and adherents throughout the year.