

BENIN 2022 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 persons 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.

Government authorities, political leaders, and municipal officials engaged religious leaders on advancing tolerance among religious groups, religious freedom, social peace, and national unity. On January 29, a violent clash between police and members of Azael La Lumière Church in the village of Monkpa, in the central part of the country, claimed eight lives, including two police officers deployed to the village to resolve a conflict between members of the church who were reported to be stealing crops in anticipation of the predicted end of the world and the farmers from whom they stole.

In February, an official of the country's Islamic Union stated that some young Muslim clerics who returned from training in the Middle East were preaching an intolerant form of Islam throughout the country. Allegations of abuse by church leaders against congregants made by a former priest of the Christian Church of Baname, Jean Claude Assogba, in 2021 continued to reverberate on social media. The alleged abuses included fraud, occult practices, disappearances, and poisonings.

U.S. embassy officials raised religious tolerance issues with government officials from the Ministries of Justice, Social Affairs, and Interior, as well as with mayors of several communes. Embassy representatives regularly spoke with leaders of religious groups, including Muslim, Celestial Christian, Catholic, evangelical Christian, Vodoun, and other leaders in cities throughout the country to promote religious freedom and tolerance. Throughout the year, the embassy also engaged with religious leaders regarding conduct of various development activities and as part of an outreach to civil society organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 13.8 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2013 census (the most recent), 48.5 percent of the population are Christian, 27.7 percent Muslim (mostly Sunni), 11.6 percent practice Vodoun, 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 Vodoun or other traditional religions.

Most Muslims reside in northern regions. There are some Shia Muslims, most of whom are foreign residents. Tablighi Muslims also reside mainly in the north. 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, a request letter, copy of identification, and the group's internal rules) and payment of a registration fee of 50,000 CFA francs (\$81). If a group is not registered, the ministry may close its religious facilities until it becomes registered.

By law, public schools may not provide religious instruction. Religious groups may establish private schools with authorization from the state and may receive 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 one million CFA francs (\$1600) and five million CFA francs (\$8,000) for individuals guilty of defamation for the purpose of inciting hatred against a group of persons based on their religion using written press, audiovisual media, or printed materials.

The digital code criminalizes the use of electronic means to incite discrimination, hatred, or violence against an individual or a group of persons based on their religion. Those found guilty are subject to a one-year prison sentence and a fine of up to one million CFA francs (\$1,600).

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." There was one instance of police intervention on these grounds during the year.

On January 29, a clash between police and members of Azael la Lumiere Church in Monkpa, in the central part of the country, resulted in the death of six followers and two police officers. The conflict erupted after members of the church began to steal the harvests of farmers following the church leader's announcement of the imminent end of the world. Church members assaulted police who arrived to

restore order, which prompted police retaliation. The pastor of the church fled Monkpa, and as of year's end, authorities had not located him.

Religious groups continued to meet with government authorities to promote social cohesion. On May 24, a delegation from Nasr-Lahi-L-Fatih, a Nigerian Muslim prayer group, visited National Assembly President Louis Gbehounou Vlavonou to discuss the role of religion in promoting peace. The delegation highlighted that religious tolerance may contribute to strengthening democracy and building peace in the country.

On April 8, the mayor of Kouande in the northern part of the country, Sanni Didier Kouande-Sounon, a Christian, met with local Muslim religious leaders and encouraged them to participate in the economic and social life of Kouande.

On April 30, former president Nicephore Soglo released an Eid al Fitr message highlighting that the Muslim community, especially imams, are accountable for promoting harmony and mutual understanding wherever persons of various religious groups live in the same communities.

On September 17, parliamentarian Charles Omer Avalla and municipal officials attended a congress held by the Muslim community of Seme Podji in the southern part of the country. Avalla and municipal authorities delivered keynote speeches exhorting the community to work towards peace and national unity.

Government officials continued to attend conversions, funerals, and other religious ceremonies organized by various religious 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

At a February 18 press conference, government spokesman Wilfried Leandre Hounbedji addressed allegations of abuse by church leaders made by a former priest of the Christian Church of Baname, Jean Claude Assogba, in 2021. Hounbedji said he saw Assogba's letter of complaint on social media and that he was not able to confirm whether the allegations were being investigated, stating, "Entities responsible for investigating such allegations might be doing their job." In a September 2021 letter, Assogba denounced what he said were abuses

committed by church leadership against its congregants, including fraud, occult practices such as selling beverages made of animal blood to followers, poor conditions for and mistreatment of priests, and mysterious disappearances and poisoning of followers.

On February 17, Imam Cheikh Mohammed Youssouf, the head of Parakou's Central Mosque and third vice president of the country's Islamic Union, stated that some young Muslim clerics who returned from training in the Middle East were preaching an intolerant form of Islam throughout the country. Likewise, he criticized their building of unregulated mosques financially supported by organizations from predominantly Muslim countries in the Middle East.

On April 6, the Catholic Church held an interreligious event called "Fasting and Sharing Night" in the Notre Dame Cathedral in Cotonou. The event brought together leaders from the Catholic Church, the Protestant churches, Islam, and traditional religions. During the interfaith service, each leader prayed for peace in the country. Justin Bocovo, a priest responsible for the Diocesan Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and Ecumenism, stated that the event reflected the level of mutual understanding among religious leaders of different faiths and encouraged growing religious tolerance in the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious tolerance among religious groups, as well as the importance of advancing religious freedom, with government officials from the Ministries of Justice, Social Affairs, and Interior as well as mayors of several communes.

Embassy representatives also met with leaders of religious groups, including Muslim, Christian, Catholic, Vodoun, and others, and promoted religious tolerance. Throughout the year, the embassy engaged with religious leaders in conducting development activities and U.S. government programs, as part of the embassy's outreach to civil society organizations.

In February, the Chargé d'Affaires met with Imam Cheikh Mohammed Youssouf in Parakou to discuss challenges facing his community and to stress the priority the United States places on religious tolerance.

On April 19, the Ambassador hosted an iftar in Cotonou during Ramadan, the first embassy-hosted iftar since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several prominent imams, other Muslim community leaders, and members from different parts of the country, along with leaders and members of the Vodoun, Catholic, and evangelical Christian communities, attended the dinner. Guests and speakers highlighted the importance of fostering increased interfaith cooperation and understanding and the important role all religious leaders in the country play in their communities. Later in April, an embassy delegation met with and delivered foodstuff donations to communities at three mosques in Cotonou and Porto-Novo.

On June 1, the Ambassador met with Imam Cheikh Mohammed Youssouf in Parakou to discuss the status of religious freedom in the north and to promote religious tolerance.

On September 29, embassy officials hosted a human rights event attended by leaders of Christian, Muslim, and traditional groups. Participants shared views on religious tolerance, and embassy officials discussed and encouraged religious tolerance and respect for minority groups' rights.

On October 11, the Chargé d'Affaires met with Imam Usman Sheikh Goni Jidda of the Islamic Union of Benin, the formal association that includes many of the most influential imams in the country.