

EQUATORIAL GUINEA 2022 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 July, authorities arrested and detained Ruben Maye Nsue, a former ambassador and Minister of Justice, reportedly in reaction to a sermon he preached as an ordained Pentecostal apostle condemning the “tyranny” of the government. Following Maye’s arrest and detention, authorities interrogated other Pentecostal church officials, who subsequently condemned Maye’s actions in statements that they said were intended to preserve their ability to preach and access their congregations. The government disbanded religious groups for noncompliance with new requirements to provide a theological certificate to obtain authorization to operate. 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 U.S. Ambassador met with government officials, including the MJRAPI Minister, to discuss the importance of religious freedom and respect for human rights. U.S. 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. The embassy also hosted Muslim religious leaders and members of the diplomatic corps for the mission’s first-ever iftar during Ramadan.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.7 million (midyear 2022). 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 are Roman Catholic and 5 percent Protestant. Many Christians reportedly practice some aspects of traditional Indigenous religions as well. According to the 2015 census, 2 percent of the population are Muslim, mainly Sunni; most of the Muslim population consists of expatriates from West Africa. The remaining 5 percent of the population 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. Groups that have successfully registered in the past may re-register every two years. 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) (\$820). 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

On August 7, authorities arrested and detained Ruben Maye Nsue, a former ambassador and former Minister of Justice, reportedly in reaction to a sermon he preached as an ordained Pentecostal apostle condemning the “tyranny” of the government. Maye stated he suffered mistreatment during his detention. On August 9, the MJRAPI issued a decree barring Maye from holding church services and “disqualifying” him from serving as a minister of worship, pastor, or in any similar position because of his inflammatory statements against government officials and perceived calls for violence and disorder. Authorities also interrogated other Pentecostal church officials, especially those associated with Maye’s ordination and his church, the Prophetic Ministry of the Shadow of Christ. The other Pentecostal officials eventually issued statements condemning Maye’s statements, an action that they said was intended to preserve their ability to preach and access their congregations.

During the year, the MJRAPI continued to enforce the requirements to renew registration that originally took force in late 2021. All leaders of churches must present a certificate of theology or religious studies from an internationally recognized institution of higher education, and the National University of Equatorial Guinea (UNGE) must issue an equivalent certificate.

Many religious groups in the country criticized the 2021 regulations and some evangelical Christian churches reportedly lodged a formal complaint with MJRAPI during the year. None of the religious leaders reported having presented the required certificate, since UNGE is not yet able to issue them. As a result of this regulation, families of foreign missionaries have had to leave the country, while others are confined to their houses without any option to renew their temporary residency or permanency permit because their churches are unable to register.

In February and March, the government ordered the closure of several religious groups for noncompliance with the new regulations to renew registration, including churches in Akonibe, Luba, Nsork, Bata, and Malabo. The leaders of the churches in Malabo protested to MJRAPI and eventually secured permission to reopen these churches for the rest of the year; at year’s end they were awaiting re-registration. The new regulations disproportionately adversely affected evangelical Christian churches: the Catholic Church is exempt from the

requirements, Muslim communities are already established, and other religious communities are too small to be registering new entities.

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God-Stop Suffering, run by Brazilian missionaries and disbanded in 2020 by presidential decree for violating COVID-19 protocols, successfully reopened during the year and was operating at year's end.

During the year, the government maintained the price of registration of religious groups at 350,000 CFA francs (\$570), and religious groups could apply 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 to hold services provided they finished before 9 p.m. and did not disturb the peace. The government punished evangelical Christian groups for holding activities outside the prescribed period and permanently closed some churches and church branches.

Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians continued to report that residency permits (which are separate from group registration permits) were prohibitively expensive, at 400,000 CFA francs (\$650) 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 deportations throughout the year, but no reports of specific targeting of missionaries. The residency permit fee for foreign missionaries was the same as for other foreigners.

The regulation requiring applicants to prove their missionary status and submit a theological certificate precluded most missionaries from qualifying for a residency permit. 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. On August 15, the Metropolitan Cathedral of Malabo (also known as Santa Isabel Cathedral) reopened its doors with a massive, government-funded ceremony in the presence of the President and his wife, members of government, diplomats, businessmen, and representatives from other religious groups, including evangelical Christians, Muslims and Baha'is. Special Envoy and Secretary of State of the Vatican, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, celebrated the Mass.

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.

For the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the Catholic Church held and hosted a National Day of Prayer lunch in person. By law, the lunch rotates to a different Christian denomination to host each year.

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 U.S. 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. The embassy also hosted Muslim religious leaders and members of the diplomatic corps for the embassy's first iftar during Ramadan.

Embassy officials spoke with the Catholic Archbishop of Malabo to discuss the dynamics between the church and secular authorities as well as the ongoing Batete church project. Embassy officials met with evangelical Christian pastors and Protestant leaders to discuss the impact the registration requirements had on their churches and communities. They also discussed religious freedom and the ability to freely practice religion with Muslim religious and community leaders. Finally, embassy officials discussed the needs facing minority religious communities with representatives from the Baha'i faith.

Renovation of the Batete Catholic Church began during the year, but the continued deterioration of the church building since the project was originally developed in 2019 significantly complicated work. The embassy and the World Monuments Fund, the project implementer, continued to explore ways to move the renovation forward. The national government has also committed funding.