

COTE D'IVOIRE 2017 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 in employment. It emphasizes that religious tolerance is fundamental to the nation's unity, national reconciliation, and social cohesion. It forbids speech that encourages religious hatred. On June 6, members of a mosque closed in 2016 held a sit-in to protest its closing. As in previous years, the government organized and supervised Hajj pilgrimages for Muslims and funded pilgrimages to France and Israel for Christians. In January Muslim and Catholic leaders participated in dialogue between the government and soldiers who staged a mutiny over payment of bonuses. The vice president, the prime minister, and members of the government attended an interfaith ceremony on the Day of Remembrance for the 22 persons killed during the March 2016 terrorist attack in Grand Bassam. A Catholic priest and an imam said prayers for the victims.

On June 21, during a sermon on the Night of Destiny, an imam condemned what he termed the widespread corruption and impunity of the government in the presence of several high-level government officials.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed the importance of religious tolerance with political figures in the government, the political opposition, and the national media. In November an embassy official met with the director general of religious affairs to discuss how the directorate manages interreligious dialogue. The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy representatives visited the city of Man, in the west, on several occasions, where they met with government and religious leaders to discuss a conflict over the leadership of a prominent mosque. In June the Charge d'Affaires led an embassy delegation on a visit to an impoverished neighborhood of Abidjan to participate in an iftar during Ramadan at the Abobo Rail mosque. The Charge d'Affaires and embassy representatives met with religious leaders and groups, such as Fondation Djigui, throughout the year to discuss their role in maintaining a climate of tolerance and religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 24.1 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the most recent census (in 2014), 42 percent is Muslim, 34

percent Christian, and 4 percent adherents of indigenous religious beliefs. Approximately 20 percent did not respond to the census. Many Christians and Muslims also practice some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs.

Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Harrists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Southern Baptists, Copts, adherents of the Celestial Church of Christ, and members of the Assemblies of God. Muslim groups include Sunnis, Shia, Sufis, and Ahmadis. Other religious groups include Buddhists, Bahais, Rastafarians, followers of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and Bossonists, who follow traditions of the Akan ethnic group.

Traditionally, the northern part of the country is associated with Islam and the south with Christianity, although adherents of both religious groups live 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 prohibits religious discrimination in public and private employment and provides for freedom of conscience and 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 (Direction Générale des Cultes), within the Ministry of Interior, is charged with promoting dialogue among religious groups and between the government and religious groups, providing administrative support to groups trying to become established, monitoring religious activities, and managing state-sponsored religious pilgrimages and registration of new religious groups.

The law requires all religious groups to register with the government. Groups must submit an application to the Department of Faith-Based Organizations. The application must include the group's bylaws, names of the founding members and board members, date of founding, and general assembly minutes. The department

investigates the organization to ensure the religious group has no members or purpose deemed politically subversive and that no members are deprived of their civil and political rights. There are no penalties prescribed for groups that do not register, but those that register benefit from government support. For example, the government provides free access to state-run television and radio for religious programming to registered religious groups that request it. Registered religious groups are not charged import duties on devotional items such as religious books and religious items such as rosaries.

Religious education is not included in the public school curriculum but is often included in private schools affiliated with a particular faith.

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

Government Practices

On June 6, women and children from the Guinean faction of one of the largest mosques in Man staged a sit-in to protest its closing in 2016. Local authorities closed the mosque following violent incidents to resolve a question of leadership between the Guinean and Ivorian factions. The women ended their sit-in on June 25, on the condition that the local authorities would look into reopening the mosque. The mosque was still closed at the end of the year.

The government continued to supervise and organize Hajj pilgrimages for Muslims and fund pilgrimages to Israel and France for Christians, as well as fund local pilgrimages for members of independent African Christian churches. The government organized and transported 4,200 pilgrims to the Hajj and funded pilgrimages for 3,500 Christians of all denominations.

The government included prominent Muslim and Catholic religious leaders in talks with disgruntled soldiers who staged a mutiny in January over the back payment of promised bonuses. Religious leaders also met with the soldiers before the second mutiny in May, and shared their assessment with government officials that the soldiers were likely to stage a second mutiny.

The national government declared the one-year anniversary of the March 2016 terrorist attack in Grand Bassam a “Day of Remembrance.” On this occasion, the mayor organized a public ceremony to unveil a headstone in memory of the victims. A Catholic priest and an imam said prayers for the victims.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Ivoirians regularly celebrated each other's religious holidays by attending household or neighborhood gatherings, regardless of their own faith.

While religious leaders said they shunned working too closely with political parties, an imam used his influence to condemn what he termed widespread corruption and impunity on June 21 during a sermon on the Night of Destiny, the holiest night during Ramadan, at which several high-level government officials were present.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy representatives frequently discussed the importance of religious tolerance with figures in the government, the political opposition, and the national media. In March an embassy official attended the anniversary ceremony of the 2016 terrorist attack in Grand Bassam and emphasized the need for religious tolerance. In November an embassy official met with the director general of religious affairs. In the meeting, officials discussed how the directorate manages interreligious dialogue. This includes regular outreach with leaders of faith communities, with the aim of preventing radicalization and preserving the peaceful relations between religious groups. The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials took multiple trips to Man, in the west, where they met with government, civil society, and religious leaders to discuss the 2016 closure of a prominent mosque, whose members had resorted to violence to resolve a question of leadership. The embassy urged government officials to work to reduce tensions. Embassy officials also met with representatives of both sides of the conflict to allow them to air their grievances and continued efforts to resolve the conflict.

In June the Charge d'Affaires led an embassy delegation on a visit to the Abobo Rail mosque in one of the most impoverished neighborhoods of Abidjan to participate in an iftar meal celebrating Ramadan. He made a donation of food and other items and spoke on national television and radio on the importance of tolerance in a diverse society. In September an embassy official attended Eid al-Adha ceremonies in Grand Bassam. During this visit he spoke on national television and gave an interview to *Fraternite Matin*, the state-owned newspaper, on the importance of religious tolerance. The embassy conducted a social cohesion program for youth using soccer as a vehicle to teach youth themes of tolerance, respect for diversity, and conflict resolution. The program specifically included mention of the need for tolerance in a religiously diverse country.

Foundation Djigui, a human rights organization founded by a prominent imam, participated in an embassy-hosted panel discussion on the need to reform cultural and traditional practices that discriminate against women, particularly female genital mutilation, which is common in Muslim communities.

Under an agreement between Voice of America (VOA) and Al-Bayane Radio, VOA's *Dialogue des Religions* (*Dialogue of Religions*) in French continued to reach millions of listeners across the country with its weekly broadcast on the Islamic radio station. *Dialogue des Religions* featured a host and guests – often religious scholars or journalists – who discussed religious issues in the news and answered listeners' questions on various facets of religion. The embassy also continued its *Hello, America!* Broadcast – a monthly radio program in partnership with the Al-Bayane Islamic radio station which had the largest audience in the country. The program featured Americans from the embassy who represented different ethnic and religious backgrounds and spoke about the value of American diversity, as well as religious tolerance and diversity.