

# **BENIN 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution establishes a secular state and provides for freedom of religious thought, expression, and practice. All religious groups must register with the government. There were five deaths following the intervention of security forces in a dispute concerning the control of a mosque in Semere.

On the night of May 10, a group of Voodoo followers vandalized the Catholic prayer center of Notre Dame de Lanta in the commune of Klouekanmey in the southwestern part of the country. Residents of Save destroyed one of the mosques belonging to the Benin chapter of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Association in Save, in the central part of the country. Several NGOs including UNICEF and Plan International raised concerns over the inability of individuals in Voodoo convents to leave or convert from the religious group. Interfaith dialogue occurred regularly and throughout the country.

Embassy officials engaged with imams and other religious leaders to discuss strategies to best promote religious freedom and tolerance in the northeastern part of the country. The embassy hosted an iftar for prominent imams and delivered a message of religious tolerance and concord.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.7 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2013 census, 48.5 percent is Christian, 27.7 percent Muslim (mostly Sunni), 11.6 percent Voodoo, 2.6 percent indigenous religious groups, and 2.6 percent other religious groups. The largest Christian denominations are Roman Catholic with 25.5 percent of the population and Celestial Christian with 6.7 percent. Groups each constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Methodists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahais, Baptists, Pentecostals, followers of the Family Federation of World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), and Eckankar followers. The census reported 5.8 percent declare no religious affiliation.

Many individuals who identify themselves as Christian or Muslim also practice Voodoo or other traditional religions.

Most Muslims are concentrated in northern areas. The few Shia Muslims are primarily foreign residents. Southern areas are more heavily Christian.

## **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 Ministry of Defense through its gendarmes, generally in rural areas, and the Ministry of Interior through the police, generally in cities, have the authority 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.

Persons who wish to form a religious group must register with the Ministry of Interior. Registration requirements include submission of administrative materials (including the applicant's birth certificate, police record, request letter, copy of identification, and the group's internal rules) and payment of a registration fee of 50,000 CFA francs (\$80). If a group is not registered, the Ministry of Interior will order the closing of the religious facilities until the group is registered.

By law, public schools may not provide religious instruction. Religious groups may establish private schools given the authorization of the state and may benefit from state subsidies.

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

### **Government Practices**

Following a dispute between two relatives competing to become the imam of a mosque in Semere in the commune of Ouake, local authorities in October closed the mosque to allow for the two sides to come to an understanding. Supporters of the disputing parties, however, forced the mosque doors open for Friday prayers, according to the local police chief. Security forces intervened, resulting in five dead and many others injured.

On July 3, two factions of the Protestant Methodist Church of Benin signed an agreement that ended a 19-year-old feud between the two groups. Political leaders and media commentators attributed the agreement largely to President Patrice Talon's mediation efforts. The two factions disagreed over the ownership of specific properties, despite a court ruling in favor of one faction. President Talon coordinated and attended a church service on July 3 at the Palais des Congres in Cotonou where leaders of the two factions signed a memorandum of understanding on reaching reconciliation.

On the occasion of Eid al-Fitr, the government, supporting an initiative of the former ombudsman, officially launched a petition requesting that the UN Secretary General create an appropriate structure for interreligious and intercultural dialogue for peace. The initiative was a follow-up to the May 2015 international symposium held in Cotonou on the theme "African Initiative on Education for Peace and Development through Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue." Many local religious and political leaders committed themselves to this initiative and to implementing projects to increase religious tolerance.

Government officials attended inductions, funerals, and other religious ceremonies organized by various groups. State-owned television often broadcast these events. Police provided security for any religious event upon request.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were reports of interreligious conflict that involved intervention by government security forces. On the night of May 10, a group of Voodoo followers vandalized the Catholic prayer center of Notre Dame de Lanta in the commune of Klouekanmey in the southwestern part of the country. According to media reports, the Voodoo followers accused the chaplain in charge of the prayer center with counteracting the efficacy of their rituals intended to make rainfall in the region. They reportedly also blamed the chaplain for angering their deity by building the prayer center and practicing Catholic rites in the area. Gendarmes intervened in the conflict to restore peace to the community.

Residents of Save destroyed one of the mosques belonging to the Benin chapter of the Ahmadi Muslim Association in Save, in the central part of the country. A larger mosque was erected on the site of the old mosque with foreign funding, but the Ahmadi community stated that they had no role in the new mosque.

Several NGOs, including UNICEF and Plan International, raised concerns about the inability for individuals in Voodoo convents to leave or convert from the religious group. International media sources reported that children were often abducted and forcibly enrolled in such convents and were sometimes restricted when attempting to leave. UNICEF reported 432 convents in five of 77 municipalities.

Interfaith dialogue occurred regularly. On May 14, the Ecumenical Foundation for Peace in Africa (EFPA) gathered religious and traditional leaders from Benin, Togo, Ghana, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, France, and Asia in the city of Azove. Participants made a pledge to advance peace in the country and in Africa by fostering interreligious dialogue. In a keynote address, the president of EFPA cited potential threats to religious concord in the country and called for concerted efforts to address them. The president of EFPA raised issues about conflict within the Protestant Church, minor conflicts between the Catholic Church and Voodoo followers, land disputes involving religious groups, among other topics. The event concluded with a parade and a concert in Azove to engage the local population.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

During the year, embassy officials met with imams and other religious leaders to encourage religious tolerance. On January 28, embassy officials met with representatives of the Framework for Interfaith Dialogue in Kandi to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. Discussions focused on strategies developed by the Framework to promote religious tolerance while countering the threat of violent extremism in Kandi.

On June 27, the Ambassador hosted an iftar for prominent imams and Islamic scholars. The Ambassador highlighted the importance of tolerance and interfaith dialogue.