

GUINEA-BISSAU 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes separation of religion and state and the responsibility of the state to respect and protect legally recognized religious groups. There were no reports of significant government action affecting religious freedom.

Some Muslim community members again reported concerns about what they termed “stricter” Islamic practices taught by foreign imams to the local Muslim population.

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. U.S. embassy personnel from Dakar, Senegal, met with high-level government officials as well as leaders of various religious communities to promote religious freedom and tolerance. In September embassy representatives from Dakar met and discussed religious activity and freedom with representatives of the National Union of Imams.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.8 million (July 2017 estimate). Estimates of the religious composition of the population vary widely, but according to a 2010 study by the Pew Research Center, approximately 45 percent is Muslim, 31 percent follows indigenous religious practices, and 22 percent is Christian. There are small communities of Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews, many of whom are foreign citizens.

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 but do not maintain a high public profile. Adherents of indigenous religious beliefs generally live in all but the northern parts of the country. The Christian population, including Roman Catholics and Protestants, are primarily from the Pepel, Manjaco, and Balanta ethnic groups and are 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 as 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, there is no religious instruction in public schools. The Ministry of Education regulates and enforces the decree against religious teaching in public schools. There are some private schools operated by religious groups.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

There were no reports of significant government actions affecting religious freedom.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some Muslim community members reported concerns about what they termed “stricter” Islamic practices taught by foreign imams to the local Muslim population.

Religious group representatives reported a general atmosphere of mutual respect. For instance, Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic leaders held meetings during the year to discuss the long-running political crisis affecting the country and participated in dialogue with political leaders in an attempt to resolve the impasse. Different religious confessions also promoted respect for different religions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. Representatives from the U.S. Embassy in Dakar, Senegal, discussed religious freedom with government officials, such as the minister of justice and the attorney general, in the presence of foreign Christian and Muslim missionaries in the country.

Embassy representatives also met with representatives of religious groups to discuss religious freedom. In September the Ambassador separately met and discussed religious activity and freedom with representatives of the National Union of Imams and the auxiliary bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Guinea-Bissau.