

SAO TOME AND PRINCIPE 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and worship and equality for all, irrespective of religious belief. It grants religious groups autonomy and the right to teach their religion. Religious groups must register with the government. Groups of unknown assailants vandalized houses of worship of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in October and one adolescent died when police clashed with crowds.

Religious leaders affirmed good relations among religious groups.

U.S. embassy staff based in Gabon, in periodic visits to the country, met with key government officials in the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights and with religious leaders to encourage continued respect for religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 208,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). The Roman Catholic bishop's office estimates more than 85 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, approximately 12 percent Protestant, and less than 2 percent Muslim. Protestant groups include Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Evangelic Assembly of Christ, Universal Church of Christ, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, and the Thokoist Church. The number of Muslims has increased over the past 15 years due to an influx of migrants from Nigeria, Cameroon, and other African countries. Some Christians and Muslims also adhere to aspects of indigenous beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship. It provides for equality of rights and obligations irrespective of religious belief or practice and for freedom of religious groups to teach their faith and to organize themselves and their worship activities. According to the constitution, these rights are to be interpreted in harmony with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and may be restricted only in cases envisaged in the

constitution or suspended during a state of emergency or siege declared according to the terms of the constitution and law.

Religious groups must register with the government. If a religious group does not register, the group is subject to fines and possible expulsion if it is a foreign religious group. To register, a group must send a letter requesting authorization to the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights. Once the group obtains authorization, it must submit the following documents to a notary public: the ministry's approval letter; the group's statutes; the minutes or report from a meeting attended by at least 500 representatives of the group and signed by its president and secretary; copies of the national identity cards of those who attended this meeting; a list of board members; and a certificate from the Registrar's Office attesting that no existing organization has the same name. After a payment of 1,000 dobras (\$45) for notarial fees, an announcement is published in the government gazette, and the group may then operate fully as a registered group. Once registered, a religious group does not need to register again. Registered religious groups receive the same benefits, such as tax exemptions, as registered nonprofit organizations.

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

Government Practices

On October 16, a group of approximately 400 individuals vandalized the headquarters of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in the capital, and one adolescent was killed when police attempted to disperse the crowd. Crowds also vandalized Universal Church buildings outside the capital the same day. The unrest reportedly occurred in reaction to the September conviction by a Cote d'Ivoirian court of Sao Tomean citizen Ludumilo Veloso, pastor of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Cote d'Ivoire, for defamation and slander against the Church. The court sentenced him to one year in prison. On October 10, Alda Ramos, a member of parliament, told news media that the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God must secure Veloso's release or risk government sanctions, including possible expulsion of the evangelical Christian church from the country. Two well-known comedians denounced the pastor's sentence on social media, which observers said may have contributed to stoking public sentiment against the Church. Two Brazilian pastors from the Church left the country following threats on social media. The government opened an investigation regarding the violence. As of November, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God resumed services and Veloso was released on appeal in Cote d'Ivoire.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders affirmed continued good relations among religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. U.S. embassy staff in Gabon, in periodic visits to the country, engaged with government officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights to encourage continued respect for religious freedom.

Embassy officials met with religious leaders, including the Roman Catholic bishop, evangelical Protestant religious leaders, and an imam, to discuss the involvement of religious groups in social issues affecting their communities.