

SAO TOME AND PRINCIPE 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and the law on religious freedom provide for freedom of religion and worship and equality for all, irrespective of religious belief, and assure judicial protection to all religious denominations. Both the constitution and the religious freedom law grant religious groups autonomy and the right to teach their religion. Religious groups must register with the government. From the outset of the pandemic, religious leaders supported government COVID-19 awareness campaigns and used television and radio messages in support of prevention measures. The government invited religious leaders to listening sessions prior to deciding on preventive measures to be adopted.

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

U.S. embassy local staff based in Sao Tome met with government officials in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Justice, Public Administration, 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 214,000 (midyear 2021). The Roman Catholic Bishop's Office estimates approximately 50 percent of the population is Roman Catholic; previous estimates put the Catholic percentage of the population as high as 85 percent. The Catholic Bishop's Office said the decrease was due to persons leaving the Catholic Church for other religious beliefs, but government COVID-19 protocols that limited church service attendance to between 33 and 50 percent of capacity made it difficult to estimate the Catholic percentage of the population. The last official census of religious beliefs was in 2012. In 2019, the Catholic Bishop's Office estimated the population was 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, Thokoist Church, Manna Church (of Portuguese origin), and others. The number of Muslims has increased over the past two decades due to an influx of migrants from Lebanon, 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. A 1971 religious freedom law acknowledges and ensures religious freedom for all and judicial protection for religious denominations. According to the law, the state does not profess any religion and ensures that its relations with religious organizations are based on the separation of religion and state. The law also stresses that all religious denominations are entitled to equal treatment. There are no laws regulating hate crimes or hate speech related to religion.

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, Public Administration, 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 (\$46) 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.

Religious education exists in the official curriculum but is not required. There were no reports of religious education being provided in public schools. There are two schools run by religious groups, one Catholic and the other Seventh-day Adventist. The Ministry of Education provides oversight on the curricula of

religious schools, and both schools are open to church members and nonmembers. They provide a general education, as well as a religious education.

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

Government Practices

During the year, the government did not receive any registration requests for new religious groups.

Government decisions on COVID-19 prevention measures were taken in coordination with religious leaders. The government invited religious leaders to listening sessions prior to deciding on preventive measures to be adopted. Other than limiting church services to a maximum of one-half capacity, with services held on alternate days, there were no reports of significant government actions affecting religious freedom. The churches accepted these restrictions. From the outset of the pandemic, religious leaders supported government COVID-19 awareness campaigns and used television and radio messages in support of prevention measures.

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 and Engagement

There is no permanent U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and limited flights, U.S. embassy staff in Gabon, which handles U.S. relations with Sao Tome and Principe, reduced visits to the country. Embassy local-based staff in Sao Tome engaged in meetings and telephone calls with religious leaders and government officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration, and Human Rights to encourage continued respect for religious freedom.