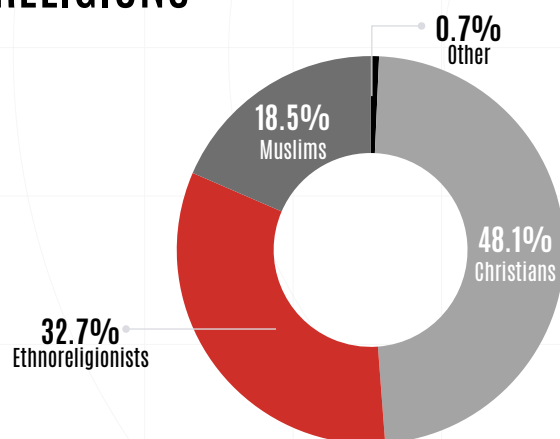


**TOGO****RELIGIONS**

LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Constitution of the Togolese Republic assures equality before the law for all, regardless of religion (Article 2).¹ It enshrines freedom of religion and this principle is generally respected by the authorities. It also prohibits political parties based on a specific religious identity (Article 7).²

Like many other countries in West Africa, Muslims are concentrated in the north of the country,³ whilst the south is predominantly Christian. Catholicism, Islam and Protestantism are “official” religions.⁴ Even though registration is not compulsory for religious groups, registering entitles them to receive benefits from the government, such as duty-free imports for development and humanitarian projects.⁵ To register, a religious association must submit its statutes, together with an explanation of its teachings, the names and addresses of its spiritual leaders, the religious and general qualifications of its clergy, a map with the location of its places of worship, and an overview of the community’s financial situation. Registration remains provisional until the authorities have satisfied themselves that the group meets the standards of ethics and public order. This process can take several years to complete.⁶

Public celebrations that might cause a disturbance or constitute

a nuisance – e.g. loud festivities at night – require special permission from the Directorate of Religious Affairs.⁷ Formal religious instruction is not offered in state schools. However, there are many Catholic, Protestant and Islamic schools to which the government provides additional teaching staff.⁸

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

During the reporting period, there were no institutional changes affecting religious freedom or reports of significant incidents that restricted freedom of religion in Togo. Relations between the government and religious groups are generally good and do not constitute a reason for conflict in the country.

Religious organisations play a prominent role in the country’s current political crisis. On 29th April 2019, Pope Francis and the President of Togo Faure Gnassingbe Essozimna held a meeting in which they stressed the need for a joint action for peace.⁹

During the election campaign for president in early 2020, Archbishop Emeritus of Lomé Philippe Fanoko Kpodzro called for the suspension of the election process so that electoral reforms demanded by the population since 2017 could be implemented.

Indeed, already in 2018, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Togo, a powerful force in the country, criticised the government. On 16th November 2018, it issued a statement saying: “It is obvious that the conduct of the elections without the necessary re-

forms will not solve the challenges facing the Togolese people but will, in fact, exacerbate tension and violence.”¹⁰

The archbishop emeritus publicly endorsed one of the opposition candidates, Agbéyomé Kodjo.¹¹

On election day, 22nd February 2020, some news reports suggested that Kodjo was leading in the polls, which led the army to place both the main opposition candidate and Archbishop Kpodzro under de facto house arrest.¹²

When opposition leader Agbéyomé Kodjo was arrested in April 2020, Togolese bishops called for peace and respect for human rights.¹³

In August 2020, researchers at the University of Toronto announced that some members of Togo’s clergy had been the victims of espionage from spyware software found on their mobile devices.¹⁴ A group of six Church groups and associations released a communiqué denouncing the intrusion, demanding accountability from the government. According to the investigation, among the people spied upon were Bishop Benoît Comlan Messan Alowonou of Kpalimé, who is also President of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Togo, and the National Director of Catholic Education, Marie Pierre Chanel Affognon.¹⁵

Due to regulations regarding the noise at religious celebrations, the Ministry of Territorial Administration (MTA) suspended six churches for failing to respect the measure. The churches had to demonstrate that they had resolved the issue in order to reopen.¹⁶

With regards to the COVID-19 crisis, Archbishop Barrigah-Bénissan of Lomé stated that the country’s Catholic Church decided to observe the measures recommended by the government and closed all churches for public celebrations. Nevertheless, in the same statement, the Archbishop denounced some acts of violence by the security and defence forces during the curfew hours.¹⁷

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Togo currently finds itself in a turbulent period of its history. President Faure Gnassingbé, who has held this position since 2005, has come under great pressure to step down, despite his re-election on 22nd February 2020 with 71% of the vote.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) finally declared that the elections had been free and transparent,¹⁸ but failure to uphold the two-term limit stipulated in the constitution has driven popular unrest for more than two years, with tens of thousands of people taking to the streets calling for government reforms.

Such social turmoil has also made Catholic Church leaders, who usually shy away from politics, more vocal. This has made the role of Mgr Philippe Fanoko Kpodzro, Archbishop Emeritus of Lomé, especially relevant. However, relations between religious communities and the government have remained peaceful, and will likely continue to be so.

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