

## **Institute on Religion and Public Policy Report:**

### **Religious Freedom in Guinea-Bissau**

#### **Executive Summary**

(1) Since its independence from Portugal in 1974, Guinea-Bissau has faced immense challenges in its transition from colonial occupation to functional democracy. It has experienced a series of military coups and a civil war as well as the recent assassination of President João Bernardo "Nino" Vieira in March 2009. As a result of the political unrest, the country has struggled economically and currently has one of the world's lowest GDP's per capita. Despite these difficulties, the constitution and current government provide for many basic human freedoms, including religious freedom. While a few instances of religious discrimination have been occurred, Guinea-Bissau generally protects religious liberty and the government is willing to rectify past discriminations.

#### **Institute on Religion and Public Policy**

(2) The Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policymakers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

#### **Legal Status and Current Government**

(3) According to the International Coalition for Religious Freedom, Guinea-Bissau's current constitution states that "[t]he freedom of thought, expression, meeting, association, manifestation, as well as the freedom of religion, are guaranteed in the conditions foreseen by the law." In addition to this explicit protection of religious freedom, the constitution guarantees that this provision will be interpreted in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international norms. The constitution seeks to prevent administrative abuses by specifying an internationally-accepted framework. Article 29, Section 1 and 2 state that "[f]undamental rights enshrined in the Constitution do not negate other rights foreseen by the laws of the Republic and applicable rules of international law" and that "[c]onstitutional and legal procedures relating to

fundamental rights have to be interpreted in harmony with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” In this way, Guinea-Bissau legally protects freedom of religion.

(4) Although the country has a turbulent political history (which includes the assassination of President João Bernardo "Nino" Vieira in March 2009), it currently experiences free and fair elections in a multiple party, republican system. President Malam Bacai Sanhá took office in June 2009 after being democratically elected and participated in a peaceful transfer of power. Consequently, the relative political stability is conducive to religious liberty.

### **Religious Demographics**

(5) Most Bissau-Guineans have practiced varying forms of animism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, however, approximately 40% practice Sunni Islam, borrowed from neighboring countries with significant Muslim populations. Most reside in the north and northeast and have Mandinka and Fula ancestry. 10% of the population practices Christianity and most reside in the urban centers of Guinea Bissau. The majority of the Christian population is Roman Catholic due to the influence of Portuguese colonialism, yet recent missionary activity has led to a growing Protestant community as well. It is also worth noting that both Muslim and Christian Bissau-Guineans often exhibit syncretic tendencies, combining traditional animist practices with their Muslim or Christian faith.

### **Specific Instances of Religious Discrimination**

(6) In 2001, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community was banned by the Bissau-Guinean government. Although Ahmadiyya members attempted to repeal the ban, the government failed to honor their claim due to some reports of Ahmadiyya rioting and unrest in Gabu in 2005. Nevertheless, the Ahmadiyya community appealed the ruling again in 2006 and the government granted their legitimate request, allowing them to practice legally. Since 2006, there have not been any reports of governmental or societal discrimination against this community.

(7) While evangelical Protestant Christians enjoy government protection, some instances of social discrimination have been reported. According to the missionary organization “The Seed Company,” which specializes in Bible translation, some converts to Christianity have experienced social pressure. Tio Sabino, an ethnic Balanta hailing from the north, says that when he and his wife were married as Christians, local shamans cursed their marriage in order to prevent them from having children. Although this incident occurred in the 1970’s, the organization claims that residual prejudice against evangelicals exists in some areas of Guinea-Bissau.

## **Positive Trends**

(8) In August 2009, Catholic station Radio Sol Mansi and Muslim radio station Recom signed an official agreement to exchange radio programs in an effort to promote religious dialogue. Although the stations have worked together informally in the past on interfaith projects, this official accord solidified their commitment to mutual understanding and social collaboration.

## **Conclusion**

(9) Since its independence from Portugal in 1974, Guinea Bissau has faced immense challenges in terms of political stability and infrastructural development. Although it has experienced military coups and civil war in its recent history, Guinea Bissau's government is currently a stable democracy and protects many basic human rights, including freedom of religion. The Bissau-Guinean constitution provides for religious liberty and expression and requires these provisions to be interpreted within an internationally recognized framework. While the government discriminated against the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in the past, they have rectified the situation and currently allow them to practice freely. Evangelical Christians seem to experience some minor social prejudice, but the government protects their legal rights both individually and as a community. Despite these instances, the government protects freedom of religion overall.