



# Sao Tome & Principe



Stable / Unchanged —

## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Christians : **96%**
- Baha'is : **2.4%**
- Agnostics : **1.4%**
- Others : **0.2%**

194.000

964 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe consists of two archipelagos around the two main islands in the Gulf of Guinea, off the western equatorial coast of Central Africa.

The country saw cycles of social unrest and economic insecurity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries before independence from Portugal was achieved peacefully in 1975. The second smallest African country after the Seychelles, São Tomé and Príncipe remains one of Africa's most stable and democratic countries. The Portuguese legacy is visible in the country's culture and customs which combine African and European influences.

Under the constitution, the Republic is a secular state. The state is separate “with respect to all religious institutions”<sup>[1]</sup> All citizens are equal before the law, regardless of their religious beliefs. Religious freedom is an “inviolable” and “fundamental” right and Article 26 provides that religious groups are “free in worship, in education and in their organisation”. No one may be persecuted on account of his or her religion. However, it should also be noted that “no one may be [ . . . ] exempted from civic obligations or duties because of his convictions or practice of religion.”

Under the constitution, the meaning of “religious freedom” in the country is to be “interpreted and integrated” in harmony with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Restrictions are permissible only insofar as they are “foreseen in the Constitution and suspended during the validity of a state of siege or state of emergency declared in the terms of the constitution and of the law”. In practice, the government respects religious freedom.

There are no official statistics for religious demographics and estimates vary wildly. According to the Association of Religion Data Archives, “it is estimated that 72 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, and 23 percent Protestant. Protestantism has grown considerably in recent years due to missionary activities. The number of Muslims has increased

due to an influx of illegal immigrants from Nigeria and Cameroon.<sup>[2]</sup> According to the Catholic Bishop's Office, more than 85 percent of the population is Catholic. There are no mosques or madrassas in the country.

Some Christian and Muslim citizens adopt aspects of indigenous beliefs derived from the religions of African coastal societies. Religious brotherhoods led by native priests organise religious festivals in honour of the patron saints of towns and parishes and many people travel to attend such ceremonies. As a result of this mix of culture and religions, for many Catholics, whilst baptisms and funerals carefully follow Catholic rituals, other sacraments are not widely celebrated.

Under Article 30, the state cannot 'reserve for itself the right to plan education and culture according to any philosophical, political, ideological or religious policies'. The country has to a certain extent struggled with the provision of education, but there are no indications that education is provided in a way that is discriminatory on the grounds of religious belief.

Religious groups must register in order to be recognised by the government. After completing the necessary formalities, the registration of the group is published in the Official Gazette. The group may then operate without special governmental restrictions. Registration confers the same tax benefits as not-for-profit organisations. Failure to register may result in a fine and, and in the case of foreign religious groups, possible deportation. There were no reports of the government refusing to register a religious group. Catholic and protestant missionaries are active in the country.

The only religious feast day that is observed as a national holiday is Christmas Day.

## | Incidents

There were no significant incidents of state or non-state actions that affected religious freedom in the period under review.

## | Prospects for freedom of religion

The status of religious freedom in São Tomé and Príncipe is expected to remain stable in the foreseeable future. There are generally amicable relationships between different religions.

## | Endnotes / Sources

[1] Sao Tome and Principe's Constitution of 1975 with Amendments through 1990, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Sao_Tome_and_Principe_1990.pdf?lang=en), [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Sao\\_Tome\\_and\\_Principe\\_1990.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Sao_Tome_and_Principe_1990.pdf?lang=en), (accessed 17th February 2018).

[2] Sao Tome and Principe, Association or Religious Data Archives, [http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/Countries/Country\\_195\\_2.asp](http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/Countries/Country_195_2.asp), (accessed 17th February 2018).