Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.

Guinea-Bissau

Population: 1.69 millions (#153 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 36,125 square km. One of the smallest continental African countries, Guinea-Bissau borders the North Atlantic Ocean, Senegal, and Guinea. Many small islands off the mainland coast form the Archipelago Dos Bijagos and pertain to Guinea-Bissau. Terrain consists of flatlands and swampy coastal plains dominated by mangroves. Tropical climates occurs year round with a rainy season from June to November and a dry season characterized by harmattan wind, a dry, dusty West African trade wind originating in the southern Sahara, from December to May. Brush fires and harmattan haze and dust resulting in poor visibility are natural hazards. Environmental issues include deforestation, oil erosion, overgrazing, and overfishing. Guinea-Bissau is divided into nine administrative regions.

Peoples

Fula: 28.5%

Balanta: 22.5%

Mandinga: 14.7%

Papel: 9.1%

Manjaco: 8.3%

Beafada: 3.5%

Mancanha: 3.1%

Bijago: 2.1%

Felupe: 1.7%

Mansoanca: 1.4%

Balanta Mane: 1.0%

Other: 1.8%

Unknown: 2.3%

Balanta, Fula, and most ethnic groups pertain to the Western Bantoid family. Balanta reside in coastal areas, whereas Fula live in the southeastern interior. Fula are found in many nations throughout West Africa. Mandinga (Mandinka) belong to the Mande family group and populate eastern areas.

Population: 1,833,247 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 2.48% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 4.81 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 59.2 male, 63.6 female (2018)

Languages: Balanta (20%), Fula [Pulaar or Fulani] (18%), Upper Guinea Creole (14%), Mandjak (12%), Mandinka (10%), Papel (9%), Biafada (3%), Mankanya (3%), Bidyogo (2%), other (9%). Portuguese is the official language. Portuguese and Portuguese-based Creoles are commonly spoken second languages. No languages have over one million native speakers.

Literacy: 59.9% (2015)

History

African tribes have inhabited Guinea-Bissau for millennia and gave rise to the Kingdom of Gabu, which was part of the Mali Empire prior to Portuguese colonization. The Portuguese began exploring the coastal region in the late fifteenth century, which became part of Portugal's West African Slave Coast. Cuba and neighboring Portuguese colonies seeking independence assisted Guinea-Bissau in its independence movement, which culminated in independence from Portugal in 1974. Almost continuous political turmoil and instability has occurred since independence. A military coup in 1980 established Joao Bernardo Vieira as president until 1999, when the military removed him from office. During this nineteen-year period, Vieira attempted to establish a free market system and held elections in 1994 but heavily controlled political affairs. Kumba Yala was appointed president by the transitional government in 2000 until removed by the military in 2003 and replaced by Henrique Rosa. Vieira was reelected in 2003 but was assassinated in 2009. Malam Bacai Sanha was elected president in a 2009 emergency election, but he died in 2012 after long-term illness. A military coup occurred in 2012 and remained in power until elections were held in 2014. Political gridlock occurred in the mid- and late 2010s between factions in the ruling party.

Culture

With no ethnic majority, Guinea-Bissau is an agglomeration of many West African cultures with a Portuguese colonial past. Portuguese creoles have facilitated communication and cooperation between many ethnic groups. Most ethnic groups practice a patriarchal society, although some groups, such as in the Bijagos Archipelago, are matriarchal. Polygamy in most areas is socially accepted.[1] Alcohol and tobacco cigarette consumption rates are low.

Economy

GDP per capita: $1,900 (2017) [3.18% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.461 (2018)

Corruption Index: 16 (2018)

Guinea-Bissau has a poorly developed economy and ranks among the poorest nations in the world. In 1998, the infrastructure was severely damaged by fighting between government troops and rebel militias. Some rebuilding has occurred in the past two decade, with economic growth in the late 2000s, but years of political stalemate have hurt economic growth. Inequality of wealth is extreme. Most the population relies on subsistence agriculture. Agriculture employs 82% of the workforce and generates 50% of the GDP. Cashew nuts are an important crop. Other primary crops include rice, corn, beans, cassava, and other nuts. Industrial activity is limited to food processing. Commercially viable mineral deposits have yet to be exploited. Primary trade partners include India, Portugal, Vietnam, and Senegal.

Corruption levels rank among the highest worldwide and have worsened in the past decade. Corruption is perceived as widespread and in all areas of government. Rebel forces in neighboring Senegal traffic arms into the country. The Archipelago Dos Bijagos has become increasingly involved in trafficking cocaine and other illicit drugs from South America to Europe due to its geographic location and separation from the mainland. Human trafficking remains a concern.

Faiths

Muslim: 45%

Indigenous beliefs: 31%

Christian: 22%

Other: 2%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 270,000

Seventh Day Adventists – 3,703 – 22

Jehovah’s Witnesses – 191 – 3

Latter-day Saints – less than 50 – 0

Religion

Islam, indigenous religions, and Christianity are the most widely followed religious orientations. Those practicing indigenous religious are widely found throughout the country except in northern areas. Indigenous beliefs stress communication with spirits of the dead and the building of shrines to provide food and drink offerings.[2] Muslims are concentrated among the Fula and Mandinka and generally reside in the north and northeast. Christians are primarily Catholic, although there are many active Protestant groups. Christians are typically found in Bissau and in cities or large towns. Christians are primarily found among the Pepel, Manjaco, and Balanta.[3]

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. There have been no reported instances of government personnel or individuals discriminating or persecuting others on religious grounds. Religious groups must be licensed by the government to operate in Guinea-Bissau. There have been no reported instances of the government refusing to license a religious group.[4]

Largest Cities

Urban: 43.8% (2019)

Bissau, Bafatá, Gabú, Bissorã, Bolama, Cacheu, Bubaque, Catió, Mansôa, Buba.

Cities listed in **bold** have no congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

None of the ten most populous cities have a Church congregation. Thirty-two percent 32%) of the national population resides in the ten largest cities. A quarter of Bissau-Guineans reside in Bissau.

Church History

As of early 2020, there was no Latter-day Saint presence in Guinea-Bissau. In 1998, Guinea-Bissau became part of the Africa West Area. Guinea-Bissau has never been assigned to a mission. Bissau-Guineans have joined the Church in other countries, such as Portugal, Spain,[5] and Cabo Verde.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: less than 50 (2019)

Few Bissau-Guineans have joined the Church abroad. In spring 2010, missionaries serving in Aranjuez, Spain baptized an enthusiastic male Bissau-Guinean convert who was married to a Spaniard. In 2013, the Church reported forty-five members in Guinea-Bissau.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 0 (2019)

There are no reported Latter-day Saint congregations. Guinea-Bissau was assigned to the Africa West Area Branch when it was

first organized in 2011.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Portuguese.

All Church scriptures and most church materials are available in Portuguese. Materials translated into Fulani (Fula and Futa) and Mandinka include Gospel PrinciplesandThe Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Health and Safety

Due to poor living conditions and tropical climate, Guinea-Bissau has a very high risk for the spread of infectious disease. HIV/AIDS infects 3.5% of the population.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church's humanitarian and development work in Guinea-Bissau is limited to only one emergency response initiative.[6]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

No legal or cultural obstacles prevent an official Church establishment. Other Christian faiths proselyte freely and have not reported instances of societal abuse of religious freedom. Many opportunities for humanitarian and development work have yet to be pursued, which may lead to a future Latter-day Saint presence.

Cultural Issues

With one of the highest percentages of followers of indigenous religions in Africa, the Church may face challenges adjusting teaching methods to meeting the needs of prospective investigators and members in Guinea-Bissau. Indigenous beliefs share some similarities with Latter-day Saint beliefs, such as interest in the welfare of our departed ancestors. The frequent and widespread practice of indigenous religion may result in a tendency for some members to retain these cultural beliefs after baptism. Christians concentrated in Bissau and the larger cities will likely facilitate the Church's initial establishment by proselytizing a population with a religious background to whom the Church has tailored past proselytism approaches. Furthermore, larger cities allow for fewer mission outreach centers, increasing efficiency.

National Outreach

Deep poverty, political instability, a small population, distance from currently established mission outreach centers, no United States embassy in the country, and the relatively recent commencement of Latter-day Saint missionary activity in Portuguese-speaking Africa have contributed to a lack of a Church presence in Guinea Bissau. The entire population remains unreached by current mission outreach efforts. Nations bordering Guinea-Bissau did not have a Church presence established

until the mid-2010s.

Guinea-Bissau may one day be assigned to the Cape Verde Praia Mission given the widespread use of Portuguese as a second language. Current opportunities to teach Bissau-Guineans in other nations may help the Church established an official presence. However, many of these individuals do not return to their home country.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Bissau-Guineas appear receptive to the Church in other nations .Although no convert baptisms have occurred in Guinea-Bissau, native members have joined the Church abroad. Bissau Guineans who join the Church abroad have returned to their home country. However, poor living standards and chronic political instability deter many from returning back to Guinea-Bissau. Suspected low rates of member activity among isolated Latter-day Saints in Guinea-Bissau have appeared a major contributor for the lack of a Church presence despite nearly fifty members who reportedly lived in the country in 2013. It is likely that most, if not all, of these isolated members have not had significant leadership experience in the Church, creating challenges to establish adequate local leadership to support congregations.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Guinea-Bissau exhibits a diversity of ethnic groups, none of which constitute over 30% of the population. African nations with such large diversity tend to be politically unstable and have historic ethnic conflicts manifest themselves in all areas of society. Such conflict may carry over into the church if members from one ethnic group in a congregation do not support the leadership of their congregation led by a rival ethnic group. Although fluent in Portuguese and sharing a Portuguese colonial past, Cape Verdean Latter-day Saints may face challenges serving missions in Guinea-Bissau due to animosity directed toward wealthy Cape Verdeans who have in the past dominated governmental affairs.[7]

Language Issues

Portuguese Church materials along with limited proselytism materials in two Fulani languages and Mandinka permit outreach to occur among most of the literate population. High illiteracy creates challenges for members to accurately learn about Church doctrine and develop capable, self-sufficient leadership, but these conditions also provide opportunities for the Church to provide service teaching literacy skills.

Missionary Service

Few, if any, Bissau-Guineans have served full-time missionaries. No missionary work had occurred in Guinea-Bissau as of 2020. Once an official Church presence is established, the development of a local full-time missionary force will be crucial toward insuring long-term growth and self-sufficiency.

Temple

Guinea-Bissau currently pertains to the Accra Ghana Temple district, but it may be reassigned to the Praia Cabo Verde Temple or the Freetown Sierra Leone Temple once these temples are completed.

Comparative Growth

Guinea-Bissau is one of the few non-Islamic African nations without an official Church presence. Guinea-Bissau and São Tomé and Príncipe are also the only Portuguese-speaking African nations without a Church presence. The Church rapidly established its first member groups or branches in several predominantly Muslim West African nations in the mid- to late 2010s, such as Senegal (first branch organized in 2016), Guinea (first branch organized in 2017), Mali (first branch organized in 2017), and Burkina Faso (first member group organized in 2019).

Other missionary-oriented Christian churches report a highly receptive population and rapidly growth rates. Nevertheless, these denominations have historically struggled to develop local leadership due to poor living conditions, political instability, and isolation from larger Christian populations. Jehovah's Witnesses gain only a few converts from year to year. In 2019, there were less than 200 Witnesses who regularly proselyte who assembled in only three congregations. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has reported significant growth in the past decade but maintains a membership of less than 4,000. Many of these groups have small self-sufficient communities in Bissau and larger cities.

Future Prospects

The absence of a United States embassy in Guinea-Bissau, limited infrastructure and health care, and ongoing political instability may lead the Church to hesitate commencing formal missionary activity despite dozens of members who reportedly live in the country and widespread religious freedom. The Church's historical reliance on American senior missionaries to establish the Church in unreached nations appears a major obstacle given these conditions. Security issues also pose potential concerns, although Latter-day Saint missions have long operated in Latin American nations with similar issues. Nevertheless, the Church in West Africa during the mid- to late 2010s promptly obtained government recognition and organized its first congregations in several previously unreached nations within a matter of months or a few years, suggesting that the Church may make similar strides in the remaining unreached West African nations such as Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia. Due to the maturation of the Church in many more established African nations like Ghana and Nigeria, African senior missionary couples may be assigned to the country to assist in establishing a presence. The growth of the Church in nearby Cabo Verde may result in Portuguese-speaking African missionaries being assigned in small numbers to Guinea-Bissau once regional and international Church leaders decide to begin proselytism.

[1] "Guinea-Bissau," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 20 August 2010.
http://www.everyculture.com/Ge-It/Guinea-Bissau.html

[2] "Guinea-Bissau," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 20 August 2010.
http://www.everyculture.com/Ge-It/Guinea-Bissau.html

[3] "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Guinea-Bissau." U.S. Department of State. Accessed 7 January 2020.
https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/guinea-bissau/

[4] "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Guinea-Bissau." U.S. Department of State. Accessed 7 January 2020.
https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/guinea-bissau/

[5] Martinich, Matt. "Prospective LDS Outreach in Guinea-Bissau." www.cumorah.com. 12 August 2014.
https://cumorah.com/index.php?target=view_case_studies&story_id=376&cat_id=6

[6] "Where We Work." Latter-day Saint Charities. Accessed 7 January 2020.
https://www.latterdaysaintcharities.org/where-we-work

[7] "Guinea-Bissau," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 20 August 2010.
http://www.everyculture.com/Ge-It/Guinea-Bissau.html