

NIGER 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and worship consistent with public order, social peace, and national unity. It provides for the separation of state and religion and prohibits religiously affiliated political parties. The government prohibits full-face veils in Diffa Region under state of emergency provisions to prevent concealment of bombs and weapons. The government also prohibits open-air, public proselytization events due to stated safety concerns. Police detained a civil society activist on August 27 in connection with a conversation posted on social media stating that members of the Islamic Council, a government-formed advisory body, had accepted bribes to move the Eid al-Adha celebration by a day. A judge released him without charge on September 11. The government created an Islamic Forum with the goal of standardizing the practice of Islam in the country and preventing the use of Islamic institutions to spread Islamic extremism.

Representatives of both Muslim and Christian communities reported good relations, including ongoing interactions through a Muslim-Christian forum. Sources, however, stated that the practice of observing each other's religious holidays was decreasing and some Muslim groups were opposed to the forum.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives continued to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance through meetings with government leaders. Embassy representatives met with Muslim and Christian representatives and supported inter and intrafaith dialogues throughout the country. The embassy hosted events and organized outreach activities with religious and civil society leaders to promote religious tolerance and encourage interfaith dialogue, including several interfaith iftars.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 19.2 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the Ministry of Interior (MOI), more than 98 percent of the population is Muslim. Approximately 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni and 5 percent Shia. Roman Catholic and Protestant groups account for less than 2 percent of the population. There are a few thousand Bahais, who reside primarily in Niamey and in communities on the west side of the Niger River. A small percentage of the population adheres primarily to indigenous religious beliefs.

Some animist practices persist culturally among the Muslim majority, although they have become much less common over the past decade.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, specifies separation of religion and state as an unalterable principle, and stipulates equality under the law for all, regardless of religion. It provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship and expression of faith consistent with public order, social peace, and national unity. The constitution also states no religion or faith shall claim political power or interfere in state affairs and bans political parties based on religious affiliation.

Nongovernmental organizations, including religious organizations, must register with the MOI. Registration approval is based on submission of required legal documents, such as the group's charter, and vetting of the organization's leaders. Although some unregistered religious organizations reportedly operate without authorization in remote areas, only registered organizations are legally recognized entities. The MOI requires clerics speaking to a large national gathering either to belong to a registered religious organization or to obtain a special permit. Nonregistered groups are not legal entities and are not permitted to operate.

Registered religious groups wishing to obtain permanent legal status must undergo a three-year review and probationary period before the Office of Religious Affairs, which is under the MOI, grants a change in legal status from probationary to permanent.

The constitution specifies the President, the prime minister, and the president of the national assembly must take an oath when assuming office on the holy book of his or her religion. By law, other senior government officials are also required to take religious oaths upon entering office.

The government prohibits full-face veils in Diffa Region under state of emergency provisions to prevent concealment of bombs and weapons.

The government prohibits open-air, public proselytization events by all religious groups due to expressed safety concerns. There is no restriction on private peaceful proselytization or conversion of an individual's personal religious beliefs

from one religious faith to another, as long as the group espousing the transition is registered with the government.

The establishment of any private school by a religious association must receive the concurrence of both the MOI and the relevant Ministry of Education (Primary, Secondary, Superior, or Vocational). Private Quranic schools, established uniquely to teach the Quran without providing other education, are unregulated. Mainstream public schools do not include religious education. The government funds a small number of special primary schools (called “French and Arabic Schools”) that include Muslim religious study as part of the curriculum.

There are no restrictions on the issuance of visas for visiting religious representatives; however, permanent residency of foreign religious representatives must be approved by the MOI.

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

Government Practices

Police detained civil society activist Sirajo Issa, President of the Youth Movement for the Emergency of Niger, on August 27. Issa was reportedly detained in connection with a leaked WhatsApp conversation that he initiated, claiming members of the Islamic Council accepted a bribe to move the date of the Eid al-Adha holiday from September 1 to September 2 to avoid holding the holiday on a Friday, which according to local tradition was unlucky. He was released without charge on September 11.

The government reported that it was responding to concerns about the unregulated practice of Islam, including the incursion of foreign Islamic groups, the inconsistent application of Islamic practices, and the possible increase of Islamic extremism, by establishing an Islamic Forum with the stated goal of standardizing the practice of Islam in the country. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (within the Ministry of Interior) initiated the forum in October with a national tour engaging Muslim representatives. The forum met in late November, with approximately 200 attendees from more than 50 organizations, and began work by discussing how creation of norms and the supervision of the practice of Islam in the country can help prevent radicalization and violent religious extremism. Future meetings were expected to address means to control mosque construction, Quranic instruction, and the content of sermons.

The government engaged Islamic leaders during the year to develop consensus on the text of a law, which Islamic leaders had publicly condemned in 2016, to require that girls remain in school through their completion of secondary school. One purpose of the law is to reduce early marriage. The cabinet approved the proposal in November as a cabinet directive.

In March the government did not publicly respond to the accusations of a group of Muslim associations that condemned government efforts to improve reproductive health and curb population growth. The clerics viewed the proposed introduction of this specific teaching as an exposure of students to pornographic material, a decline of social values, and a conspiracy against Islam.

The Directorate of Religious Affairs proposed instituting a registration system for Quranic schools, which were not regulated. According to representatives of both the government and a leading Islamic association, the desire for Quranic school regulation was motivated by concern about forced begging and poor quality education, as well as the possible incursion of extremist groups. The topic was to be discussed in the Islamic Forum inaugurated in November.

Complaints about difficulties associated with performing the Hajj continued, with the government's Commission for the Organization of the Hajj and Umrah coming under criticism again, as in past years. Some observers criticized the commission for failing to negotiate adequately with travel companies and achieve a more organized Hajj and Umrah travel season. The commission oversaw Hajj participation for more than 13,000 pilgrims during the year.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some Muslims were critical of the decision of the Islamic Council, a government-appointed advisory board for Islamic events and rituals, to move the Eid al-Adha holiday from September 1, when it was celebrated by most of the Muslim world, to September 2. Critics believed President Mahamadou Issoufou was too secular and too Western-leaning, and they advocated for a more traditional practice of Islam.

Islamic representatives have expressed concern for several years that Wahhabism's presence continued to grow. There was no survey data to indicate how many Wahhabist mosques there were in the country, or to support or refute the impression of growing influence. The majority of the population adhered to the Maliki interpretation of Sunni Islam, but there were separatist branches, and

representatives of Islamic Associations said some imams preached a more radical version of Islam, which they stated may have been Wahhabist.

The Muslim-Christian Interfaith Forum continued to meet, bringing together representatives of Muslim associations and Christian churches for quarterly meetings. According to representatives of both Christian and Muslim associations, there were generally good relations between Muslims and Christians; however, according to some religious leaders, a minority of Muslims rejected any rapprochement of Muslims and Christians as a corruption of the true faith and therefore resented the forum. These religious representatives believed relations between Christians and Muslims were deteriorating and the practice of observing each other's religious holidays was decreasing.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives continued to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance through meetings with government leaders. The Ambassador raised religious freedom with the minister of interior and the foreign minister, commenting on the country's secular constitution and encouraging inclusiveness in the government's efforts to better regulate Quranic schools and Friday sermons in the interest of preventing extremism.

The Ambassador and embassy representatives met with representatives of Muslim and Christian groups to support inter and intrafaith dialogues throughout the country. The Ambassador hosted an iftar, which included Muslim, Christian, and Bahai leaders; government officials; and members of civil society, where she delivered remarks emphasizing the importance of interfaith tolerance. The embassy also hosted an iftar in the city of Maradi in the country's interior, providing a donation for the poor and showing a film about religious tolerance toward Muslims in the United States.