

MALI 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and grants individuals freedom of religion in conformity with the law. The law criminalizes abuses against religious freedom. On January 31, the government adopted a new national Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategy that included interfaith efforts and promotion of religious tolerance. The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship was responsible for administering the national CVE strategy, in addition to promoting religious tolerance and coordinating national religious activities such as pilgrimages and religious holidays for followers of all religions.

Terrorist groups used violence and launched attacks against civilians, security forces, peacekeepers, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam. In the center of the country, affiliates of Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) attacked multiple towns in Mopti Region, threatening Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious communities, reportedly for heresy.

Muslim religious leaders condemned extremist interpretations of sharia, and non-Muslim religious leaders condemned religious extremism. Some Christian missionaries expressed concern about the increased influence in remote areas of organizations they characterized as violent and extremist. Religious leaders, including Muslims and Catholics, jointly called for peace among all faiths at a celebration marking Eid al-Fitr in June hosted by President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. In January Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic religious leaders called for peace and solidarity among faiths at a conference organized by the youth of the Protestant community. The president of the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCI) and other notable religious leaders announced the necessity for all religious leaders to work toward national unity and social cohesion.

The U.S. embassy supported programs to counter violent extremism related to religion and promote peace and reconciliation. The secretary general, second-ranking official of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship, participated in an exchange program on countering violent extremism. Embassy officials met with the president and vice president of the HCI and called upon their interlocutors to promote peace and tolerance among religions. The Ambassador spoke about religious tolerance at public events and on social media. The U.S. government sponsored numerous programs to support religious diversity and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 18.4 million (July 2018 estimate). According to statistics of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship, Muslims constitute an estimated 95 percent of the population. Nearly all Muslims are Sunni and most follow Sufism. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Christians, of whom approximately two-thirds are Roman Catholic and one-third Protestant, groups with indigenous religious beliefs, and those with no religious affiliation. Groups adhering to indigenous religious beliefs reside throughout the country but mostly in rural areas. Many Muslims and Christians also adhere to some aspects of indigenous beliefs. The ministry estimates fewer than 1,000 individuals in Bamako and an unknown number outside of the capital are associated with the Muslim group Dawa al-Tablig.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of religion in conformity with the law.

According to the penal code, any act of discrimination based on religion or any act impeding the freedom of religious observance or worship is punishable with up to five years' imprisonment or 10 years' banishment (prohibition from residing in the country). The penal code also states any religiously motivated persecution of a group of persons constitutes a crime against humanity. There is no statute of limitations for such crimes.

The law requires registration of all public associations, including religious groups, except for groups practicing indigenous religious beliefs; however, registration confers no tax preferences or other legal benefits, and there is no penalty for failure to register. To register, applicants must submit copies of a declaration of intent to create an association, notarized copies of bylaws, copies of policies and regulations, notarized copies of a report of the first meeting of the association's general assembly, and lists of the names of the leaders of the association with signature samples of three of the leaders. Upon review, if approved, the Ministry of Territorial Administration grants the certificate of registration.

The constitution prohibits public schools from offering religious instruction, but private schools may do so. Islamic religious schools, which are privately funded and known locally as *medersas* (a variant of *madrassah*), teach Islam but are required to adhere to the standard government curriculum. Non-Muslim students are not required to attend Islamic religious classes. Catholic schools teach the standard educational curriculum and do not require Muslim students to attend Catholic religious classes. Informal schools, known locally as Quranic schools, which some students attend in lieu of public schools, do not follow a government curriculum and offer exclusively religious instruction.

The law defines marriage as secular. Couples who seek legal recognition must have a civil ceremony, which they may follow with a religious ceremony. Under the law, a man may choose between a monogamous or polygamous marriage. The law states that the religious customs of the deceased determine inheritance rights. Civil courts consider these customs when they adjudicate such cases; however, many cases are settled informally.

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

Government Practices

On January 31, the government adopted a new national strategy to counter violent extremism. The strategy was based on five pillars: Prevention, Protection, Pursuit, Response, and Social Cohesion. Specific objectives outlined in the national strategy include: eliminating conditions conducive to the development of terrorism and violent extremism, including but not limited to religious outreach and interfaith efforts; prosecuting all perpetrators and accomplices of crimes of violent extremism and terrorism; providing fair and diligent responses in the event of a terrorist attack or acts of violent extremism perpetrated on national territory, with respect for human rights and the rule of law; contributing to the regeneration of a collective identity, including religious tolerance and coexistence, to strengthen the bonds of national solidarity.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship was responsible for administering the national CVE strategy, in addition to promoting religious tolerance and coordinating national religious activities such as pilgrimages and religious holidays for followers of all religions. On November 17-18, the ministry organized, in coordination with the archbishop, the annual Catholic pilgrimage in Kita Cercle and called for religious tolerance among faiths, a sentiment echoed by President Keita in an official statement on November 18. The ministry also continued

supporting a training program for moderate Sufi imams in Morocco, one objective of which was to improve interfaith tolerance.

The Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission continued operating through the year. In December it opened its field office in Kidal Region. By year's end, the commission heard 10,102 testimonies, including cases of religious freedom violations.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Throughout the year, mostly in the country's central and northern regions, domestic and transnational violent terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb affiliates Ansar al-Dine, Macina Liberation Front, and Al-Mourabitoun, united under the umbrella JNIM, continued to carry out attacks against security forces, UN peacekeepers, civilians, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam.

According to eyewitness and media reporting, on September 11, in the town of Hombori, Mopti Region, armed men believed to be JNIM affiliates interrupted a party by firing in the air, threatened those in attendance, and vandalized the venue. The men announced that playing music and dancing were not acceptable in Islam.

According to church leaders in the town of Barareli, Mopti Region, on December 30, armed men believed to be affiliated with JNIM fired on the town's church while Christian youth were gathered for Bible study. No injuries were reported.

According to Christian leaders, continued threats from JNIM prevented the Christian community in Djidja from reopening its church that was closed due to threats from JNIM in 2017. Six church workers who fled the area remained displaced at year's end.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslim and non-Muslim religious leaders frequently and jointly condemned extremist interpretations of Islam. For example, on November 13, following a car bombing on the UN Mine Action Service headquarters in Gao, representatives of the umbrella organization Malian Muslim associations condemned the attack, which they said was against all faiths.

Some Christian missionaries expressed concern about the increased influence of organizations in remote areas they characterized as violent and extremist, which they believed could affect their ability to continue working in the country in the long term.

In the June Eid al-Fitr celebration hosted by President Keita, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant religious leaders renewed their calls for peace and tolerance among all faiths.

In January Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic religious leaders called for peace and solidarity among faiths at a conference organized by the youth of the Protestant community.

The government named Protestant umbrella organization leader and pastor Nouh Ag Hinfia Yattara head of the Solidarity and Fight against Exclusion Month, celebrated in October each year. Yattara led a religiously diverse group of notables that made monetary donations to vulnerable citizens and the elderly in Bamako and throughout the country.

In the months leading up to August presidential elections, HCI President Mahamoud Dicko emphasized the necessity for all religious leaders to work toward national unity and social cohesion. Prior to elections, local media reported clergy organized prayers in mosques and churches for peaceful elections.

Members of religious groups commonly attended the religious ceremonies of other religious groups, especially baptisms, weddings, and funerals. For example, in June the Archbishop of Bamako accompanied President Keita to offer greetings and pay formal respects to the “founding families of Bamako.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In conjunction with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship, the embassy supported programs to counter violent extremism in the amount of \$3.5 million in the first year of a five-year program. The CVE interventions targeted vulnerable communities to support and build capacity to address conflict, radicalization, and violent extremism related to religion and to help bring peace and reconciliation to the country. The secretary general, second-ranking official of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship, participated in a U.S. government exchange program on countering violent extremism.

Embassy officers spoke with a wide range of influential religious leaders and human rights organizations, including the president and vice president of the HCI. Embassy officials called on religious leaders to advocate for tolerance and peace among religious groups and together organized more than a dozen activities to emphasize the importance of religious tolerance and freedom. The activities included the Kalata Mankantan Tolerant Elections Campaign and Concert Series in July, which consisted of six events and involved more than 50,000 participants, and the “Living Together” civil society workshop and focus group in Timbuktu on February 10-12, which included more than 15,000 participants.

The embassy highlighted the importance of tolerance and respect for religious diversity on its social media accounts throughout the year. Some of its most widely shared postings included the Ambassador’s social media posts on Ramadan, Easter, Eid al-Fitr, and especially Eid al-Adha.