

NIGER 2019 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 continued to prohibit full-face veils in the Diffa Region under state of emergency provisions to prevent concealment of bombs and weapons. The government also continued to prohibit open-air, public proselytization events due to stated safety concerns. In June the National Assembly passed a new law on the “organization of the practice of religion,” which the president ratified in July. The new law reinforces the protection of freedom of religion as long as the religion is exercised in a manner that respects “public order and moral good.” The law, in line with previous regulations, grants the government the right to regulate and approve private construction and the use of places of worship as well as to oversee financial contributions for the construction of religious venues.

Protesters reacting to the arrest in June of an imam who criticized the draft law burned down one Christian church and attacked another in the southern city of Maradi. In May in Dolbel, near the borders with Burkina Faso and Mali, assailants reportedly attacked a Catholic church and injured a priest. In June members of the terrorist group Boko Haram kidnapped a Christian woman and threatened Christians in her village in the Diffa Region, according to international observers.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy representatives continued to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance through meetings with government leaders, including the interior and foreign ministers. Embassy representatives conveyed messages of religious tolerance in meetings with Muslim and Christian representatives, including an interfaith iftar the embassy hosted during Ramadan and a meeting with the imam of the Grand Mosque of Niamey during Eid al-Adha. The Ambassador discussed the need for interfaith dialogue with the Catholic community in Tahoua in February, attended and spoke at an event at an Assembly of God church in Niamey in September, and met twice during the year with the Catholic archbishop. The embassy sponsored programs with religious leaders nationwide focused on countering violent extremism related to religion and amplifying voices of religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 20.5 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the Ministry of Interior (MOI), more than 98 percent of the population is Muslim with the vast majority being Sunni. Less than 1 percent are Shia. Roman Catholics, Protestants, and other religious groups account for less than 2 percent of the population. There are several thousand Baha'is, 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 Muslims intermingle animist practices with their practice of Islam, although observers note this has 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.

On June 17, the National Assembly passed a new law on the organization and practice of religion that was ratified by the president in July. The law reaffirms existing laws on freedom of religion, as long as religion is exercised respecting “public order and moral good,” and provides for government regulation and approval of the construction of places of worship and oversight of financial contributions for the construction of religious venues.

Religious groups are treated as any other nongovernmental organization and must register with the MOI. Registration approval is based on submission of required legal documents, including the group's charter, minutes of the group's board of directors, annual action plan, and list of the organization's founders. 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, prime minister, and 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 the Diffa Region under state of emergency provisions with the stated purpose of preventing 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 legal 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 sponsoring the conversion 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 department of the Ministry of Education (Primary, Secondary, Superior, or Vocational). Private Quranic schools, established uniquely to teach the Quran without providing other education, are unregulated. Most public schools do not include religious education. The government funds a small number of special primary schools (called "French and Arabic Schools") that include Islamic religious study as part of the curriculum.

There are no restrictions on the issuance of visas for visiting religious representatives; however, long-term 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

The government drafted implementing regulations for the new law on religious practice that was ratified by the president in July and expected to be implemented in 2020, according to the MOI. The law was intended to "minimize fundamentalist and extremist influences" while "preserving freedom of worship" under the

constitution, according to the minister of the interior. According to the MOI, implementation of the new law will include the creation of three National Worship Councils for Muslims, Christians, and other religious groups to liaise between the government and their respective religious communities on matters such as fundraising, religious instruction, and content of sermons. Observers stated the law responded to a specific concern of the government and was intended to be a minimally invasive way of monitoring foreign, possibly extremist, influence on the practice of religion in the country.

The government continued its efforts to reduce radicalization or the risk of radicalization through the Islamic Forum, which the government formed in 2017 with the stated goal of standardizing the practice of Islam in the country and preventing the use of Islamic institutions to spread Islamic extremism. The Islamic Forum, which represents more than 50 organizations countrywide, met regularly to provide input to the government on the new law as well as to discuss control of mosque construction, regulation of Quranic instruction, and monitoring of the content of sermons.

Government officials expressed concern about funding from Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and other countries for the construction of mosques and training of imams, but according to observers, the government had only limited resources to track the extent of the funding and fully understand its consequences.

In December the government adopted a three-year National Worship Strategy to promote social cohesion, peace, and tolerance as well as freedom of worship. The strategy's six strategic goals are to design and implement a plan for the location of places of worship; promote quality religious training; encourage educational and tolerant religious public discourse; ensure "adequate supervision" of religious practice; strengthen intra- and interreligious dialogue; and discourage violent religious extremism.

With support from the World Bank, the government began reviewing the curricula of private Quranic schools and *medersas* (madrassahs).

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On June 15, protesters blocked streets, burned tires, and attacked Christian churches in the southern city of Maradi following the June 14 arrest of Sheikh Rayadoune, a Muslim cleric who criticized the draft religion law as "anti-Muslim"

during Friday prayers, according to press reports. Late in the evening of June 15, a group of youths burned down an Assembly of God church and set fire to the pastor's car, while police stopped attackers from damaging the Abundant Life Christian church. Police arrested approximately 150 individuals during the unrest; there were no reports of injuries. Prior to his release from custody on June 16, Rayadoune called for an end to the violence and said his statements regarding the new law were based on an inaccurate translation. On June 16, local authorities and religious leaders reportedly visited the burned church and apologized to the congregation.

On May 13, unidentified gunmen attacked a Catholic church in Dolbel near the border with Burkina Faso, injuring a priest, according to international observers. On June 7, members of the terrorist group Boko Haram kidnapped a Christian woman in the village of Kintchendi in the Diffa Region, releasing her a few days later with a written warning to Christians living in the area to leave the town within three days or be killed.

Some Muslim representatives continued to express concern that Wahhabism's presence was growing. 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 version of Islam they stated may have been Wahhabist.

The Muslim-Christian Interfaith Forum continued to meet, bringing together representatives of Islamic associations and Christian churches for regular meetings to discuss interfaith cooperation. According to representatives of both Christian and Muslim groups, there were generally good relations between Muslims and Christians; however, according to some religious leaders, a minority of Muslims rejected closer ties between Muslims and Christians as a corruption of the true faith and therefore resented the forum. The representatives of the Interfaith Forum said that the practice of observing each other's religious holidays was decreasing, and that they had a general sense that relations between Christians and Muslims had deteriorated mildly, largely due to social pressure for increased strict Islamic observance.

On November 16, the Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly of Niger held a press dinner to celebrate the bicentenary of the birth of the Bab (a central figure of the Baha'i Faith) and share information regarding the Baha'i Faith.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy representatives continued to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance through meetings with government and religious leaders. The Ambassador raised religious freedom with the interior minister and the foreign minister, encouraging broad engagement with Muslim associations in the government's efforts to promote religious tolerance and counter extremist messages.

The Ambassador and embassy representatives met with representatives of Muslim and Christian groups to support intra- and interfaith dialogues to promote tolerance and understanding and to jointly tackle societal issues where religious leadership and tradition are driving factors, such as education for all and reducing early marriage. On May 23, embassy officials hosted an interfaith iftar, which included Muslim, Christian, and Baha'i leaders; government officials; and members of civil society. At the event, an embassy official delivered remarks emphasizing the importance of interfaith tolerance. The Ambassador also met with the imam of the Grand Mosque of Niamey, who is the leader of the Islamic Association of Niamey, during Eid Al-Adha to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador met with the Catholic community to urge interfaith dialogue in Tahoua in February, attended and spoke at a rally at an Assembly of God church in Niamey in September, and met twice during the year with the Catholic archbishop.

The embassy sponsored a program that included training on balanced media coverage of religious issues. In April the embassy provided financial support to a local organization to promote religious tolerance and understanding among youth in western Tillabery at risk of recruitment by extremists. Additionally, the embassy marked Religious Freedom Week with a social media campaign.

The embassy sponsored programs with religious leaders nationwide focused on countering violent extremism related to religion and amplifying voices of religious tolerance.