

# **BURKINA FASO 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution states the country is a secular state, and both it and other laws provide for the right of individuals to choose and change their religion and to practice the religion of their choice. Religious-based attacks, targeted killings, and kidnappings continued in the Sahel Region and spread to the Center North and Center East Regions. The U.S. Institute of Peace reported in May that the country was experiencing “the (greater) Sahel’s most severe spike in violence” and the government was limited in its capacity to respond by deploying security forces particularly near the northern border with Mali. The government stated it believed individuals associated with terrorist organizations carried out all the religiously-based attacks during the year. According to President Roch Marc Christian Kabore, terrorists appear to have shifted their tactics from stoking conflict between farmers and herders to inducing a similar divide between Muslims and Christians. In response to dozens of terrorist attacks on religious targets throughout the year, the government repeatedly condemned the violence and called for religious tolerance and peace. In June Prime Minister Christophe Dabire joined the Catholic Archbishop of Ouagadougou during Eid al-Fitr prayers led by the Grand Imam of Ouagadougou and called on the population to cultivate religious tolerance.

Domestic and transnational terrorist groups operated throughout the year, which as of September, was described by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) as “on track to be the most violent and deadliest year on record.” These organizations continued and intensified their campaign of violence throughout the year against state entities and civilians and carried out targeted killings of at least 38 persons based on their religious identity, according to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Attackers continued to kill imams, other clergy, and worshippers while attacking and destroy mosques and churches. Reports stated that they also forced communities in the northern part of the country to dress in specific Islamic religious garb. Terrorists continued attacking schools and killing teachers for teaching a secular curriculum, and for teaching in French rather than Arabic, according to media reports. As of August, terrorist violence forced 2,024 schools to close, depriving more than 330,000 children of education, according to UNICEF. Expanding their targeted killings, terrorist groups increasingly attacked Christian religious leaders and worshippers and destroyed churches. Two Catholic parishes in the northern Sahel Region closed due to insecurity.

Human rights organizations and religious groups expressed concern that the increase in religiously targeted violence threatened the “traditional peaceful coexistence” of religious groups in the country. Academic and other observers stated that the “stigmatization” of the mostly Muslim ethnic Fulani community because of their perceived sympathy for Islamists aggravated existing societal tensions and posed a threat to stability. Throughout the year, high ranking Muslim and Catholic leaders repeatedly called for an end to violence and urged interfaith tolerance. Members of the Burkinabe Muslim Community Organization, the Catholic Archdiocese of Ouagadougou, and the Federation of Evangelical Churches stated that despite the increase in religiously motivated attacks, religious tolerance remained widespread, and numerous examples existed of families of mixed faiths and religious leaders attending each other’s holidays and celebrations. In the aftermath of attacks against Christians, Muslim clergy participated in Christian services and offered prayers for the dead.

U.S. embassy officials discussed the increase in religiously motivated attacks, particularly in the Sahel and East Regions, with the government, including the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, the Ministries of Defense and Security, and the Office of the President. In addition, embassy staff met religious leaders at the national and local levels to promote religious freedom, interfaith tolerance, and civil dialogue. Throughout the year, the Ambassador met with imams and Catholic and Protestant leaders to reinforce U.S. support for religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador hosted an iftar during Ramadan to showcase religious freedom and tolerance. At the iftar, he gave joint remarks with the minister of territorial administration and decentralization and stressed the importance of religious tolerance. During the year, the embassy conducted regular outreach with imams, Catholic priests, and Protestant leaders to understand the current threat to religious freedom and tolerance in the country as a result of the unprecedented violence against both Christian and Muslim worshippers.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 20.3 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2006 census, 61 percent of the population is Muslim, predominantly Sunni, 19 percent is Roman Catholic, 4 percent belong to various Protestant groups, and 15 percent maintain exclusively indigenous beliefs. Less than 1 percent is atheist or belongs to other religious groups. Statistics on religious affiliation are approximate because Muslims and Christians often adhere simultaneously to some aspects of traditional or animist religious beliefs.

Muslims reside largely in the northern, eastern, and western border regions, while Christians are concentrated in the center of the country. Traditional and animist religious beliefs are practiced throughout the country, especially in rural communities. The capital has a mixed Muslim and Christian population.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states the country is secular, and both the constitution and other laws provide for the right of individuals to choose and change their religion and to practice the religion of their choice. The constitution states freedom of belief is subject to respect for law, public order, good morals, and “the human person.” Political parties based on religion, ethnicity, or regional affiliation are forbidden.

The law allows all organizations, religious or otherwise, to register with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, which oversees religious affairs. The ministry, through the Directorate for Customary Affairs and Worship, monitors the implementation of standards for burial, exhumation, and transfer of remains; helps organize religious pilgrimages; promotes and fosters interreligious dialogue and peace; and develops and implements measures for the erection of places of worship and the registration of religious organizations and religious congregations. Registration confers legal status, and the process usually takes approximately three to four weeks and costs less than 50,000 CFA francs (\$86). Religious organizations are not required to register unless they seek legal recognition by the government, but after they are registered, they must comply with applicable regulations required of all registered organizations or be subject to a fine of 50,000 to 150,000 CFA francs (\$86 to \$260).

Religious groups operate under the same regulatory framework for publishing and broadcasting as other entities. The Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization may request copies of proposed publications and broadcasts to verify they are in accordance with the nature of the religious group as stated in their registration, and it may conduct permit application reviews.

The government generally does not fund religious schools or require them to pay taxes unless they conduct for-profit activities. The government provides subsidies to a number of Catholic schools as part of an agreement allowing students from public schools to enroll in Catholic schools when public schools are at full

capacity. The government taxes religious groups only if they engage in commercial activities, such as farming or dairy production.

Religious education is not allowed in public schools. Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant groups operate private primary and secondary schools and some schools of higher education. These schools are permitted to provide religious instruction to their students. By law schools (religious or not) must submit the names of their directors to the government and register their schools with the Ministry of National Education and Literacy; however, the government does not appoint or approve these officials. The government reviews the curricula of new religious schools as they open and others periodically to ensure they offer the full standard academic curriculum; however, the majority of Quranic schools are not registered, and thus their curricula not reviewed.

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

### **Government Practices**

The government stated that terrorists attacked religious institutions with the aim of dividing the population. On October 15, President Kabore issued a statement after an October 11 attack on a mosque in the northern part of the country that claimed 16 lives saying, “These attacks aim to weaken our coexistence and social cohesion, bequeathed to us by our ancestors, and which we must preserve at all costs. This is an opportunity for me to urge Burkinabe, of all religious denominations and all social and community origins, to remain united and in solidarity. Religions are vectors of tolerance, and these barbarous and villainous attacks reflect on the nature of the enemy, which we must fight, in an individual and collective commitment of every moment.”

On December 2, after a violent attack on a Protestant church service in the Eastern Region that killed 14 worshippers the previous day, Prime Minister Dabire said that through the prayers and efforts of all faiths, including “Muslims, evangelical churches, Christians, animists, and traditional religions,” the country would “overcome” rising violence.

In multiple public statements, then mayor of Djibo (Soum Province, Sahel Region) Oumarou Dicko, who on November 3 was killed by terrorists, allegedly for political motives, at Namsiguia, in the Center North Region, said that there was no indigenous conflict among religions in countries in the Sahel, and that despite the

terrorist group Ansarul Islam claiming its origins in the country, religious freedom and tolerance remained strong in countries throughout the embattled Sahel.

Media reports detailed citizens' shock at the "brazenness" of attackers and "dismay" at the inability of the country's armed forces to stop or prevent all terrorist attacks, as attacks continued to escalate against Muslims, Protestants, and Catholics. Comments across news editorials and social media singled out the government's response to the May 12 attack on a Catholic church in Dablo, a town in the Center North Region, as especially negligent. The attackers reportedly travelled as a group of 40 motorcyclists across the region toward Dablo, a substantial number that observers said should have provided warning to security forces of their threatening presence. During the May 12 attack, the gunmen attacked during Mass, killing a priest and five worshippers. Local citizens widely condemned security forces present in Dablo the day of the attack who "could have fought but waited for reinforcements to arrive from 45 kilometers [28 miles] away."

The government allocated 75 million CFA francs (\$129,000) each to the Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and traditional animistic communities. Sources stated that this funding was meant to demonstrate equitable government support to all religious groups in the country. The government also provided funding to registered Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim (commonly referred to as "Franco-Arabic") schools through subsidies for teacher salaries, which were typically less than those of public school teachers.

In July the government allocated approximately 1.1 billion CFA francs (\$1.89 million) to subsidize the costs of 8,143 Muslims for the Hajj. The government continued to routinely approve applications from religious groups for registration, according to religious group leaders, although the government announced it rejected some on "moral" grounds.

### **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

Domestic and transnational terrorist groups continued to operate throughout the year and carried out targeted killings of at least 38 individuals based on their religious identity, according to media reports. These groups included U.S. designated terrorist groups Ansarul Islam, Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISIS-GS), Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, and Al-Mourabitoun. Although many attacks in the country went unclaimed, observers attributed most to terrorist groups including Ansarul

Islam, JNIM, and ISIS-GS. Media reported that the terrorist groups regularly targeted Muslim and Christian clergy, religious congregations, houses of worship, teachers, local government employees, and schools. Some imams were killed after being accused of collaborating with security forces. As of August, terrorist violence forced 2,024 schools to close, depriving more than 330,000 children of education, according to UNICEF. In a number of attacks, militants singled out and killed individuals wearing Christian imagery such as crucifixes, according to media reports and church leaders. Some attacks took place at houses of worship, both Christian and Muslim, during prayers or services. According to President Kabore, the terrorists appear to have shifted their tactics from stoking conflict between farmers and herders to inducing a similar divide between Muslims and Christians.

Examples of attacks against Muslims reported by media, NGOs, and government included the bombing of a Quranic school at Djibo on November 26, and the October 11 attack by armed individuals that killed 16 Muslim worshipers during Friday prayers at a mosque in the northern village of Salmossi. The same day, unknown gunmen reportedly attacked a mosque of the Muslim Tijani order in Mansila. On May 14, presumed terrorists killed an imam and his son near the village of Sambonay. On March 31, terrorists killed a prominent local Muslim leader and six of his relatives in Arbinda in the northern Soum Province. On February 4, an unknown individual hacked worshippers with a machete in the central mosque of Gaoua, wounding five. On January 25, terrorists kidnapped and later beheaded the deputy imam of Boukari in the northern province of Oudalan in the Sahel Region.

On December 1, militants attacked worshippers during Sunday Mass at Honkoutoura, in Foutouri, in the East region and killed 14 including the pastor. On August 4, militants attacked two churches in the village of Tialboanga, one Catholic and one Protestant, and killed three worshippers; the attack was the first armed attack targeting the Christian community in the eastern part of the country according to observers. On May 26, heavily armed men attacked a church in Toulfe, killed a retired catechist and three other worshippers, and wounded two others, including a second catechist. Bishop Justin Kientenga of the Catholic Diocese of Ouahigouya in the northeast part of the country described the event as a terrorist attack. On May 13, armed men attacked a group of Catholics in procession with a statue of the Virgin Mary between the villages of Singa and Kayon in the Centre North Region. According to the press, the minors were spared, but the attackers abducted and killed four adults and burned the statue. On May 12, gunmen attacked a Catholic church in Dablo, as congregants were leaving after Mass, killing a priest, Father Simeon Yampa, and five worshippers. The

attackers then burned the church and looted nearby businesses. A government spokesman said the terrorists also destroyed all places serving alcohol. The government issued a statement saying, “These terrorist groups are now attacking religion with the macabre aim of dividing us.” On April 28, armed individuals attacked a Protestant church in the village of Silgadji at the end of service. Two church leaders and four worshippers were killed, and others taken away to an unknown destination aboard a motorcycle/trailer, according to media reports. On April 23, terrorists killed a Christian pastor in the village of Botou in the northern Soum Province. On March 17, gunmen kidnapped Father Joel Yougbare, a Catholic priest, between Botogui and Djibo in Soum Province. Although media reports suggested his remains had been found, the Catholic Church had not confirmed this as of year’s end.

On March 11, gunmen abducted two teachers from their school in Djibo and subsequently killed them. The government stated the incident was the work of terrorists who opposed secular education and wanted to scare other teachers into abandoning their posts. On February 17, militants waving a black flag fired in the air and entered a mosque, telling people to go out and pray and that they were seeking state representatives and teachers. On February 16, presumed JNIM and/or ISIS-GS militants burned a school in Timambadi. On February 4, militant group members entered the village of Natiaboani, held sermons, prohibited brewing of traditional beer (*dolo*), burned a liquor store and a school, and threatened a municipal councilor they accused of cooperating with the administration and defense and security forces. On February 3, militants burned a school in the village of Salmossi. Also on February 3, gunmen attacked the village of Intissalatene in the area of Tollel-Kaya in Oudalan Province, firing gunshots in the air, burning alcohol beverage outlets and a school, and stealing motorbikes belonging to teachers.

On April 29, presumed JNIM militants attacked the village of Nassere, the assailants fired in the air and burned bars that served alcohol at the market and seized motorbikes, according to media reports.

During a series of terrorist attacks on gendarmerie and police stations in Soum, North, and Oudalan Provinces, terrorist groups demanded that civilians vacate their towns, according to local residents quoted by media. In some villages, terrorists forced civilians to dress in a particular form of Islamic garb, including ankle length pants for men and full-face coverings for women.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Human rights organizations and religious groups expressed concern that the increase in religiously targeted violence threatened the “traditional peaceful coexistence” of religious groups in the country. Observers reported the stigmatization of the Fulani community, because of their perceived association with militant Islamist groups, aggravated social tensions in some regions and that self-defense militias at times exacted vigilante justice on Fulani communities in northern and central regions of the country because of their alleged connection to “jihadists.”

On May 25, according to local media, villagers adhering to an indigenous religion destroyed and ransacked several Protestant churches in the village of Lena and neighboring Oulana, following a dispute between a traditionalist/animist youth and Protestant youth.

During a year that observers stated was characterized by “unprecedented violence” against religious persons and entities by terrorists and violent extremists, high ranking Muslim and Catholic leaders repeatedly called for nonviolence and urged interfaith tolerance. For example, after terrorists killed six Christians worshipping in Dablo on May 12, Catholic Archbishop of Koupela Seraphin François Rouamba urged the community of Dablo and the nation to forgive the attacks and remain peaceful. “We have been working together for years and years. Muslims, Protestants, Catholics, those of traditional religions, we have always all walked hand in hand. Therefore, we must not allow such tragic acts to separate us,” he stated in an interview with local newspapers. Muslim clergy participated in the funeral services of those Christians killed in Dablo and offered prayers for the dead.

During prayer services in Ouagadougou on Eid al-Fitr on June 4, Vice President of the Muslim Community of Burkina Faso El Hadj Hatimi Deme said, “Muslim affairs need to interest the Christians; Christian affairs need to interest the Muslims.” Prime Minister Dabire, a Christian, and Catholic Archbishop of Ougadougou Cardinal Philippe Ouedraogo also participated in the prayer service and in an iftar, and both called for religious tolerance. Observers stated their participation was a show of solidarity in light of the Muslim casualties of the terrorist violence.

Members of the Burkinabe Muslim Community Organization, the Catholic Archdiocese of Ouagadougou, and the Federation of Evangelical Churches stated that despite the increase in religiously motivated attacks, religious tolerance

remained widespread, and numerous examples existed of families of mixed faiths and religious leaders attending each other's holidays and celebrations. Members of the largest religious communities promoted interfaith dialogue and tolerance through public institutions, such as the National Observatory of Religious Facts, which conducted awareness campaigns and mediation throughout the country. They also worked through nongovernmental organizations such as the Dori-based Fraternal Union of Believers, which encouraged various religious communities, specifically in the Sahel Region, to conduct socioeconomic activities with the goal of fostering religious tolerance. The Catholic Archdiocese of Ouagadougou cited an interfaith Eid al-Adha celebration in August, in which Christian religious leaders participated alongside their Muslim counterparts, in what they stated was an effort to promote religious tolerance in the country.

New Muslim and Protestant congregations opened without approval and oversight from existing Muslim and Protestant federations, continuing a trend from the previous years. Religious leaders stated the Muslim and Protestant federations were often undermined by small new religious groups not falling under their oversight and took positions counter to the federation's messages of tolerance. They said the lack of oversight made it difficult for the official religious groups to monitor and regulate the activities and messages of these new groups.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy officials raised the increase in religiously motivated attacks, particularly in the Sahel and East Regions, with the government, including the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, the Ministries of Defense and Security, and the Office of the President. Embassy staff regularly discussed events and policies affecting religious freedom with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, including the equitable registration process for religious groups, the equitable treatment of religious groups by the government, and the status of the relationship between the ministry and different religious groups.

The Ambassador and embassy officials met separately with Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant religious leaders throughout the country, at local and national levels, to encourage their efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and advocate for religious tolerance and freedom.

In February embassy officials invited religious leaders from the Sahel Region to serve as panelists during a seminar that opened a military exercise between the

U.S. and multiple African partner nations. Religious leaders discussed the nexus between terrorist attacks and an erosion of historically longstanding religious freedom and tolerance in the country.

Embassy representatives used social media platforms to reinforce messaging for religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador raised the need to counter the threats to the country's tradition of religious freedom and tolerance as part of his regular messaging during interviews.

The embassy funded literacy programming in Quranic schools in northern Burkina Faso, the curriculum of which focuses on peaceful dialogue, nonviolent conflict resolution, and religious tolerance.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador met with imams, priests, and pastors to reinforce U.S. support for religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador hosted an iftar during Ramadan, attended by Muslim, Christian, and other religious leaders as well as senior government officials, to encourage religious freedom and tolerance. At the iftar he gave joint remarks with the minister of territorial administration and decentralization and stressed the importance of religious tolerance.

During the year, embassy officers conducted regular outreach with imams, Catholic priests, and Protestant leaders to understand the current threat to religious freedom and tolerance in the wake of the unprecedented violence against both Christian and Muslim worshippers perpetrated by terrorists. On April 1, the Ambassador met with Cheick Abdul Aziz Aguib Sore, a prominent regional religious preacher, leader, and advocate for peace. Their discussion focused on strategies to engage Quranic schools and Muslim leaders in the promotion of religious tolerance. On November 1, the Ambassador and visiting U.S. officials met with the papal nuncio and the bishop of the northern town of Dori to engage on next steps in religious tolerance advocacy in light of increasing terrorist attacks.

Throughout the year, embassy officials organized or supported several activities to respond to the social divisions between religious groups. For example, in the North Region, where violent extremist organizations exacerbated religious tensions to foster conflict, U.S. assistance provided local mayors with in-kind assistance to organize community meals that brought together a cross section of community members from various ethnicities and religions to share a meal and discuss differences in social and religious beliefs in order to reduce divisions and ease tensions.