

DJIBOUTI 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but mandates equality for persons of all faiths. The government maintained its authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including assets and personnel of all mosques. Religious groups must register with the government, which conducts lengthy background checks as part of the registration process. Foreign religious workers must obtain a work permit and purchase annual residency cards. The government continued to implement a decree for state control of mosques, and the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs' High Islamic Council closely vetted all Friday prayer service sermons. The government continued to mandate a civic and moral education course based on Islam for all students in public schools as well as private schools run by non-Muslim religious organizations.

Norms and customs continued to discourage conversion from Islam. Muslim and Christian religious leaders noted traditional social networks often ostracized converts from Islam. Non-Muslims faced discrimination in employment and education. There were reports of hateful speech against minority religions on social media.

U.S. embassy officials met regularly with government officials and religious leaders to discuss equitable treatment of religious groups by the government.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 922,000 (midyear 2020 estimate), of which 94 percent is Sunni Muslim. According to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Shia Muslims, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Jews, Baha'is, and atheists constitute the remaining 6 percent. Non-Muslims are generally foreign-born citizens and expatriates, highly concentrated in Djibouti City.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates the registered refugee population at 31,131, of whom 43 percent are from Somalia, 36 percent from Ethiopia, 17 percent from Yemen, and 3 percent from Eritrea. Refugees are both Muslim and non-Muslim, but no data exists on their religious breakdown.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Islam is the religion of the state, according to the constitution. The constitution mandates the government respect all faiths and guarantees equality before the law, regardless of one's religion. The law does not impose sanctions on those who do not observe Islamic teachings or who practice other religious beliefs. The constitution prohibits religiously based political parties.

It is illegal for any faith to proselytize in public.

The Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs has authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including mosques, religious events, and private Islamic schools. Imams are civil service employees of the ministry; the government owns mosque properties and other assets. The ministry's High Islamic Council vets all Friday prayer service sermons.

The Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs and the Ministry of Education jointly oversee the school curricula and teacher certification of approximately 40 Islamic schools, except for religious schools run by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the country, which follow the Saudi curriculum. Other international schools are permitted to offer their own curriculum. The public school system is secular. Private schools run by religious organizations must offer a civic and moral education course based on Islam to all students, including non-Muslims.

The President swears an Islamic religious oath.

Muslims may bring personal status matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance either to family courts, whose code includes elements of civil and Islamic law, or to civil courts. Civil courts address the same matters for non-Muslims. Citizens are officially considered Muslims if they do not specifically identify with another religious group. The family courts, referred to as sharia courts, have two stages. The complainant first brings the grievance to the neighborhood council (*Qadi*), which either issues a judgment or transmits the case to the family court. If the complainant is not satisfied with the decision of the *Qadi* or the family court, he or she may appeal to the court of first instance of the family court or the supreme Sharia Council.

The government requires all foreign and domestic religious groups to register by submitting an application to the Ministry of Interior, which conducts a lengthy background investigation of the group. The investigation reviews group leadership, religious affiliation, sources of finance, and the group's objectives within the country. Ties to religious groups considered extremist, strong political agendas, and relations with unfriendly foreign nations are factors that could cause a group's application to be rejected. Domestic and foreign Muslim religious groups must inform the High Islamic Council at the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs of their existence and intent to operate. Muslim and non-Muslim foreign religious groups must also gain approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to operate in the country. Once approved, every foreign religious group signs a one-year agreement detailing the scope of its activities, and its workers must obtain work permits and purchase annual residency cards. Foreign religious groups must submit quarterly reports to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and renew their agreements every year. The quarterly report details activities, origin of funding for activities, and scope of work completed, and it identifies beneficiaries. The religious groups may not operate in the interim while awaiting registration.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The country has declared a reservation regarding proselytizing in open public spaces.

Government Practices

Since 2014, the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs has overseen all Islamic matters, and mosques have little operational independence. A ministry representative stated that government control and oversight of mosques was necessary to preclude political activity from mosques and counter foreign "extremist" influence.

The government continued to permit registered non-Islamic groups, including Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches, to operate freely, according to Christian leaders. Religious signage was permitted at the Catholic Church. Muslim citizens were permitted to enter Christian churches, although societal pressure discouraged conversion. There were no limitations on the importation of religious literature for registered non-Islamic groups. No other Christian groups and no non-Christian groups had legal recognition from the government. The government subsidized the cost of utilities at some church properties of registered non-Islamic groups, since it considered some church properties to be part of the national patrimony. Religious groups not registered

with the government, including the Ethiopian Protestant and non-Sunni Muslim congregations, which applied for registration years ago, operated without government sanction. Observers stated these groups and other religious minorities hosted worship gatherings in private housing and usually at night, in part because of reduced police presence at that time.

In September, the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs collaborated with the Ministry of Youth and Sports to invite a well-known Somali Islamic scholar, Sheik Moustapha Ismail, to preach at several mosques and host a large event at the national stadium. The events were intended to encourage and revive religious practice among youth.

The government continued to allow non-Islamic religious groups to host events and proselytize on the groups' private property; in practice, groups refrained from proselytizing in public spaces such as hotels or street corners due to cultural sensitivities and the threat of government intervention. Government officials noted that any violation of the law forbidding public proselytizing would summon the police. The government continued to permit a limited number of Christian missionaries to sell religious books and pamphlets at a bookstore in Djibouti City.

The government continued to issue visas to foreign Islamic and non-Islamic clergy and missionaries but required they belong to registered religious groups before they could work in the country or operate nongovernmental organizations. The government required foreign religious leaders to regularize their status by purchasing an annual residency card for 24,000 Djiboutian francs (\$140).

According to observers, it would be practically impossible for a non-Muslim to achieve a high position in government service.

Local public schools continued to observe only Islamic holidays, but under the direction of the Ministry of Education, schools in refugee camps continued to permit students of other religious groups to miss class for their respective religious holidays. The ministry continued work on revising the national curriculum, including reforming civic and moral education courses to promote religious inclusivity.

The government continued to implement a civic and moral education course, based on Islam, in public schools across the country. According to a Christian religious leader, private schools run by non-Muslim religious groups were required to teach the Islam-focused course.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Societal norms and customs discouraged conversion from Islam, but conversions reportedly occurred, particularly for marriages with non-Muslim partners. An Islamic leader stated that women were less likely to marry outside the Islamic faith due to societal pressures. Both Muslim and Christian leaders stated conversion from Islam was detrimental to a person's social status; Muslim religious leaders said traditional social networks often ostracized converts from Islam.

Christian groups reported continued discrimination in employment and education against converts to Christianity who changed their names. Non-Muslims reportedly hid their religious status for increased job options and societal acceptance.

A religious leader expressed concern that the operation of unregistered religious groups "in the shadows" could lead to extremism, religious intolerance, and social unease.

There were instances of individuals using social media to spread hateful messages, particularly against Christianity. A Christian religious leader stated that he had personally received threatening and defamatory messages online. He also said there were a few incidents of youths throwing stones and heckling clergy outside the main Catholic church in Djibouti City.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs, and religious representatives to discuss continued free practice of religion, including for religious minorities within refugee camps.