

# GUINEA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states the state is secular, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for the right of individuals to choose and profess their religion. The Secretariat General of Religious Affairs (SRA) continued to issue weekly themes for inclusion in Friday sermons at mosques and Sunday sermons in churches. Although the SRA did not control sermons at every mosque and church, its inspectors were present in every region and were responsible for ensuring that mosque and church sermons were consistent with SRA directives. On July 11, SRA authorities in Kankan, Upper Guinea summoned Imam Nanfo Ismael Diaby for continuing to lead prayers in a local language. Diaby and 10 of his followers were handed over to the police by SRA authorities. After the governor of Kankan intervened, Diaby was released on July 13 with no formal charges filed. The same day unidentified youths reportedly vandalized his mosque and home. The government closed all places of worship on March 26 in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19, and during the month of Ramadan, media reported instances of mosques in Kamsar and Dubreka refusing to obey the government order by remaining open for prayers. The government announced on September 3 the full reopening of places of worship after religious leaders publicly called for a lifting of restrictions.

In mid-March, at least 30 individuals died and nearly 70 were injured in Nzerekore in the southeast of the country during several days of violence following a constitutional referendum. According to media and nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports, largely Muslim government supporters and mostly Christian and Animist opposition groups clashed, with more than 80 buildings, including churches and mosques, damaged or destroyed. Archbishop of Conakry Vincent Coulibaly on September 20 issued a statement denouncing the attempted seizure by local villagers of land belonging to Catholic institutions near Coyah. The case remained pending at year's end.

On multiple occasions, the U.S. Ambassador, Charge d'Affaires, and other embassy officials met with the Secretary General of Religious Affairs and other religious leaders to discuss religious tolerance, reconciliation, and social cohesion among religious groups. The Charge met with the Grand Imam to discuss the importance of interfaith dialogue, particularly in the aftermath of the October 18 presidential election. The embassy used social media to share messages and stories of religious tolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12.5 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the SRA, approximately 85 percent of the population is Muslim, 8 percent Christian, and 7 percent adheres to indigenous religious beliefs. Much of the Muslim and Christian population incorporates indigenous rituals into their religious practices. Muslims are generally Maliki Sunni; Sufism is also present. Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and several evangelical groups. There is also a small Baha'i community, in addition to small numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, and adherents of traditional Chinese religious beliefs among foreign residents.

Muslims constitute a majority in all four regions of the country. Christians are concentrated in large cities, including Conakry, the south, and the eastern Forest Region. Adherents of indigenous religious beliefs are most prevalent in the Forest Region.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states the state is secular, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for the right of individuals to choose and profess their religious faith. It recognizes the right of religious institutions and groups to establish and manage themselves freely. It bars political parties that identify with a particular religious group. These rights are subject only to "those limits that are indispensable to maintain the public order and democracy."

By law, the SRA must approve all religious groups. Groups must provide a written constitution and application to the SRA along with their address and a fee of 250,000 Guinean francs (\$25). The SRA then sends the documents to the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization for final approval and signature. Once approved, the group becomes officially recognized. Every six months, each registered religious group must present a report of its activities to the government. Registering with the government entitles religious groups to an exemption from the value-added tax (VAT) on incoming shipments and makes them eligible for select energy subsidies.

Unregistered religious groups are not entitled to VAT exemptions and other benefits. By law, the government may shut down unregistered groups and expel their leaders. There is limited opportunity for legal appeal of these penalties.

Religious groups may not own radio or television stations.

The compulsory primary school curriculum does not include religious studies. Many parents send their children to Quranic schools (madrassahs), either in addition to primary school or as their primary form of education.

The imams and administrative staff of the principal mosque in Conakry and the principal mosques in the main cities of the four regions are government employees. These mosques are directly under the administration of the government. Other mosques and some Christian groups receive government subsidies for pilgrimages.

The Secretary General of Religious Affairs (SRA) appoints national directors to lead the Offices of Christian Affairs, Islamic Affairs, Pilgrimages, Places of Worship, Economic Affairs and the Endowment, and Inspector General. The SRA is charged with promoting good relations among religious groups and coordinates with other members of the informal Interreligious Council, which is composed of Muslims and members from Catholic, Anglican, and other Protestant churches, as well as the SRA.

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

### **Government Practices**

On July 11, Imam Nanfo Ismael Diaby, who was suspended from conducting religious activity in June 2019 by the SRA, was summoned by SRA authorities in Kankan, Upper Guinea for continuing to lead prayers in Malinke, a local language, instead of Arabic. According to local media, Diaby and 10 of his followers were then taken into police custody. According to police statements, Diaby was not arrested, but rather was handed over to the police by the local SRA authorities. After the governor of Kankan intervened, Diaby was released on July 13 with no formal charges ever filed. Following his release, several of his followers posted on social media that a group of young men damaged Diaby's mosque and home, and attacked members of his family for continuing to preach in Malinke.

The SRA continued to issue guidance outlining themes for discussion during Friday sermons at mosques and Sunday sermons in churches. The stated purpose

of the weekly guidance was to harmonize religious views in order to prevent radical or political messages in sermons. Although the SRA did not monitor sermons at every mosque and church, its inspectors were present in every region and were responsible for ensuring that mosque and church sermons were consistent with SRA directives. Clerics whom the SRA judged to be noncompliant were subject to disciplinary action. Deviations from approved guidance were often reported in various sermons at mosques and other Islamic events, but the SRA said it had difficulty imposing disciplinary sanctions.

As part of its measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, the government closed all places of worship on March 26. During the month of Ramadan, according to local media reports, there were instances of mosques in Kamsar and Dubreka refusing to obey the government order and remaining open for prayers. In June, the government authorized reopening places of worship in regions with low COVID-19 case counts. The government announced on September 3 the full reopening of places of worship after religious leaders publicly called for a lifting of restrictions. Since the SRA holds a cabinet level position, sources stated that religious associations were able to effectively lobby the SRA, and in turn the government, that places of worship should reopen on the grounds that the government had previously approved numerous political rallies without proper health measures while keeping places of worship closed.

Both Jehovah's Witnesses and the Baha'i community have not requested official recognition. Some groups stated they preferred not to have a formal relationship with the SRA since a lack of recognition granted them more freedom, as they preferred not to be subject to state regulations in the same way as an officially recognized community.

Islamic schools were prevalent throughout the country and remained the traditional forum for religious education. Some Islamic schools were wholly private, while others received local government support. Islamic schools, particularly common in the Fouta Djallon region, taught the compulsory government curriculum along with additional Quranic studies. Private Christian schools in Conakry and other large cities accepted students of all religious groups. They taught the compulsory curriculum but did not receive government support, and they held voluntary Christian prayers before school.

The government allocated free broadcast time on state-owned national television for Islamic and Christian programming, including Islamic religious instruction, Friday prayers from the central mosque, and church services. The government

permitted religious broadcasting on privately owned commercial radio, and encouraged equal time for Christian and Muslim groups.

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

In mid-March, at least 30 individuals died and nearly 70 were injured in Nzerekore in the southeast of the country during several days of violence following a constitutional referendum. According to media and NGO reports, largely Muslim government supporters and mostly Christian and Animist opposition groups clashed, with more than 80 buildings, including churches and mosques, damaged or destroyed. NGOs reported government security forces did not intervene to stop the violence and that some security forces committed abuses.

On September 20, Archbishop of Conakry Coulibaly issued a statement denouncing an attempt to forcibly “seize” property owned by Catholic institutions by residents of the village of Kendoumayah, located in Coyah Prefecture, while the case was pending in court. On September 20, Muslim Susu villagers, who said they were part of the Lower Guinea “Labesangni” nativist movement, barricaded the entry and exit of Kendoumayah, ostensibly to divide up the disputed land among themselves. Saint-Jean community members said that they were also threatened with physical assault. According to the archbishop, the dispute dated to 2014, when a local woman approached the community stating that she owned the land the community occupied. At year’s end, the dispute was before the Conakry Court of Appeals after the lower court in Coyah ruled in favor of the villagers. The archdiocese argued the lower court’s ruling was invalid because it was the state that had granted the land to the Church and no state representative was present during the ruling.

In parts of the country, including the middle and upper regions, particularly strong familial, communal, cultural, social, or economic pressure discouraged conversion from Islam, according to observers.

Many Muslim students not enrolled in private Islamic schools received religious education at madrassahs, some of which were associated with mosques and others supported by local communities. Unlike Islamic schools, the madrassahs did not teach the compulsory primary school curriculum. The government did not recognize the madrassahs nor require them to register; it allowed them to operate freely. They focused on Quranic studies, and instruction was in Arabic rather than French. Funds from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Gulf states supported some

madrassahs. Most students in madrassahs also attended public or private schools that taught the compulsory curriculum.

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

Embassy officials regularly met with the SRA and with representatives of the country's religious groups, including the Grand Imams of Conakry, Kankan, Siguiri, and Labe; Catholic and Anglican bishops; and other Muslim and Christian clergy.

The Charge d'Affaires met with the country's Grand Imam, Elhadj Mamadou Saliou Camara, at the Faycal Mosque, where he reiterated U.S. support for religious freedom, peaceful assembly, and interfaith dialogue. The Charge also thanked the Grand Imam for his work on encouraging peace across faith groups during turbulent elections in March and October.

The embassy posted messages through its social media platforms during the month of Ramadan encouraging religious tolerance.

In June, the embassy, through its various social media platforms, publicized how various faith communities and religious leaders in the United States worked together through shared common values of charity and community service to help neighbors in need during the COVID-19 global health crisis.

The embassy also promoted tolerance indirectly through its democracy and governance activities. Activities included engagement with influential local figures, including religious leaders, in order to amplify peace-building messages in communities afflicted by interethnic and religious tensions.