

# **NIGER 2020 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. Implementation of the 2019 National Worship Strategy was hindered by COVID-19 restrictions, civil unrest, and the government focus on the December general election. The government continued to prohibit full-face veils in the Diffa Region under state of emergency provisions intended to prevent concealment of bombs and weapons. The government also continued to prohibit open air, public proselytization events due to stated safety concerns. The government said it faced a series of persistent and growing security threats from the group alternatively known as the “Islamic State in West Africa” or “the Islamic State's West Africa Province,” formerly known as Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad, and commonly known as Boko Haram, a jihadist terrorist organization active in the region. In Mirriah Commune, 11 miles east of Zinder, numerous young people armed with stones and clubs demonstrated publicly to denounce the government’s ban on religious gatherings under COVID-19 restrictions and the arrest of a local imam who refused to comply.

Following the announcement of the first confirmed cases of COVID-19, the Islamic Council and the Coalition of Nigerien Churches called for a ban on collective prayers and other religious gatherings in the country’s mosques and churches. Many individuals did not comply with these decrees and large numbers of Muslims prayed at mosques the day after the High Islamic Council’s announcement. The council issued a statement urging Muslims to abide by government’s COVID-19 prevention measures during Ramadan, and also urged Muslim leaders and preachers to conduct COVID-19 awareness campaigns.

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 during the Ambassador’s meeting with the imam of the Grand Mosque of Niamey on the eve of Eid al-Adha. The embassy continued to sponsor nationwide programs with religious leaders focused on countering violent extremism related to religion and amplifying voices of religious tolerance. The embassy provided assistance in the design of new education programming, in

consultation with traditional and religious leaders, including scrutinizing school curriculum and texts for content contrary to the principles of religious freedom and tolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 22.8 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the Ministry of Interior, more than 98 percent of the population is Muslim. Of the Muslim population, the great majority is Sunni and less than 7 percent is 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 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, 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.

The law on the organization and practice of religion, passed and ratified in 2019, reaffirms existing laws on freedom of religion, as long as religion is exercised respecting “public order and moral good.” It 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 the same as other nongovernmental organizations and must register with the Ministry of Interior’s Customary and Religious Affairs Office. 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. Only registered organizations are legally recognized entities. Nonregistered groups are not legal entities and are

not permitted to operate, although some unregistered religious organizations reportedly operate without authorization in remote areas. The Ministry of Interior requires clerics speaking to a large national gathering either to belong to a registered religious organization or to obtain a special permit.

Registered religious groups wishing to obtain permanent legal status must undergo a three-year review and probationary period before the Ministry of Interior's Customary and Religious Affairs Office may grant 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 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 Ministry of Interior 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, the long-term residency of foreign religious representatives must be approved by the Ministry of Interior.

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

## Government Practices

Implementation of the 2019 National Worship Strategy was hindered by COVID-19 restrictions, civil unrest, and the government's focus on the December general election. The strategy's six goals were 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. The status of the planned National Worship Councils remained unclear at year's end.

On March 17, the government decreed 10 measures to control COVID-19, including a ban on gatherings and social distancing requirements. On March 23 in Mirriah Commune, located 11 miles east of Zinder and approximately 550 miles east of Niamey, numerous young people took part in street demonstrations to denounce the government's COVID-19-prevention ban on religious gatherings and the arrest of a local imam who refused to comply. Demonstrators barricaded the streets, burned tires, and set fire to the mayor's office. Police and gendarmerie were dispatched to break up the riot. Media reported that several young men were wounded as a result of the confrontations. On March 27, following additional clashes in Zinder, police arrested a number of demonstrators. According to press reports, most of the demonstrators were followers of Imam Garin Malam, who had urged them to disobey the government's restrictions on communal prayers.

On April 18, the High Islamic Council issued a statement urging Muslims to abide by government COVID-19 measures banning large public gatherings, including group prayers, during Ramadan. The council also urged Muslim leaders and preachers to conduct COVID-19 awareness campaigns. Large numbers of Muslims reportedly prayed at mosques the next day.

Cheikh Boureima Abdou Daouda registered as a candidate for the December 27 presidential election as the candidate of the Democratic Union of Renaissance Socialists (UDSR Martaba), a party he founded 20 years ago. Daouda was the first imam of the University of Niamey's mosque to enter a presidential race.

The Islamic Forum, established by the government in 2017 to standardize the practice of Islam and prevent the spread of Islamic extremism, continued to liaise with the government.

Government officials continued to express concern about funding from Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and other countries for the construction of mosques and the 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.

The government stated that it continued to face a series of persistent and growing security threats from the group alternatively known as “the Islamic State in West Africa,” or “the Islamic State's West Africa Province,” formerly known as Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad, and commonly known as Boko Haram, a jihadist terrorist organization active in the region. Armed terrorist groups, including Boko Haram and groups affiliated with al-Qaida, ISIS in the Greater Sahara (ISIS-GS), and ISIS-West Africa (ISIS-WA), attacked and killed both civilians and security forces, according to media. Boko Haram and ISIS-WA continued regular attacks in the Diffa Region in the Lake Chad Basin, while ISIS-GS and JNIM increased attacks in the border areas with Mali and Burkina Faso. Armed groups also reportedly conducted targeted campaigns of killings and threats against what they called “informants.” ISIS-GS and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslim affiliates in northern Tillabery Region reportedly continued charging local villagers Islamic taxes, while members of terrorist organizations in western Tillabery Region reportedly burned government-funded schools, telling villagers their children should not attend secular schools.

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

On March 19, following the announcement of the first confirmed case of COVID-19, the High Islamic Council and the Coalition of Nigerien Churches called for a ban on collective prayers and other religious gatherings in the country's mosques and churches. According to media, numerous individuals did not comply with these decrees and large numbers of Muslims prayed in mosques on March 20, the day after the High Islamic Council's announcement.

The Muslim-Christian Interfaith Forum continued to meet, bringing together representatives of Islamic associations and Christian churches 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.

#### **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 intended to promote tolerance and understanding and to jointly tackle societal issues where religious leadership and tradition were driving factors, such as education for all and reducing early marriage. The Ambassador met with the president of the Islamic Association, also known as the Imam of the Grand Mosque of Niamey, on the eve of Eid al-Adha to discuss the role of faith in society and how it could help defeat extremism related to religion.

The embassy continued to sponsor programs with religious leaders nationwide focused on countering violent extremism related to religion and amplifying voices of religious tolerance. The embassy hosted a conference on August 28 titled "Preventing Violent Extremism in Youth Through Islam," featuring Cheikh Oumarou Bizo as the guest speaker. Additionally, the embassy provided assistance in the design of new education programming in consultation with traditional and religious leaders, including scrutinizing school curriculum and texts for content that countered principles of religious freedom and tolerance.