

GUINEA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The country's constitutional, elected government was overthrown in a military coup d'état on September 5. The self-proclaimed National Committee for Reconciliation and Development (CNRD) suspended the constitution and dissolved the National Assembly. The CNRD published a Transition Charter on September 27 that states Guinea is a secular state and any act undermining the secular nature of the state or one's religious freedom is to be considered punishable by fines and imprisonment. The Transition Charter also guarantees freedom of worship within limits defined by the law. In addition, the charter stipulates that two members of the 81-member National Transition Council (CNT) are to be religious community members. As of year's end, the CNT had not yet been formed. Prior to September 5, the constitution stated that the country was a secular state, prohibited religious discrimination, and provided individuals the right to choose and profess their religion. Before and after September 5, the Secretariat General of Religious Affairs (SRA) continued to issue weekly themes for inclusion in Friday sermons at mosques and Sunday church sermons. 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. In May, Imam Nanfo Diaby was arrested while leading Eid al-Fitr prayer in the Malinke language rather than in Arabic, as required by SRA guidelines. He served five months in prison and was fined 500,000 Guinean francs (\$54). The government banned evening prayers in mosques for the last 10 days of Ramadan due to rising COVID-19 cases. This was followed by numerous protests, with multiple arrests and one person killed by security forces in Kerouane, Upper Guinea. Additionally, religious authorities suspended eight imams, with one being arrested and later released, for inciting violence, leading protests, and violating the ban on night prayers. By August, seven imams were reinstated, while one was barred from preaching. In September, media reported that security forces prevented local Wahhabi Islam followers from attending Friday prayers at a mosque in Misside Hinde near Labe, Middle Guinea Region. Local authorities closed the mosque after the prefecture's Islamic League, a civil society organization that closely follows SRA guidance, filed a complaint that the mosque lacked the necessary permits to operate.

In September, as part of a long-running dispute between the Catholic Church and Muslim Susu villagers, residents attacked the Catholic Saint-Jean Monastery in Kendoumaya with the intent of reoccupying the land. After a monk used a shotgun

to fire warning shots to disperse the crowd, villagers assaulted him. Police later dispersed the crowd without charges or arrests. The incident followed year-long efforts by villagers to claim the land surrounding the monastery and subdivide it among themselves, despite efforts by the Catholic Church, local authorities, and the Ministry of Justice to resolve the dispute. At year's end, several court cases regarding the dispute between the villagers and the Church remained pending.

The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials met on multiple occasions with the Secretary General of Religious Affairs to discuss religious tolerance, reconciliation, and social cohesion among religious groups. Embassy officials also met with religious leaders to discuss the same issues and the historic role religious leaders have played in mediating local conflicts. The Charge d'Affaires and previous participants from a U.S. government-funded exchange program took part in a service project during Ramadan to help clean the Fadiga Mosque in the Nongo neighborhood of Conakry. The Charge d'Affaires used these opportunities to speak about the importance of religious tolerance and building links between various faith communities. In February, as part of the response to an Ebola outbreak, an embassy-funded communication and engagement program brought together more than 120 Muslim and Christian leaders to encourage dialogue between local government authorities, public health officials, and religious leaders to accommodate religiously appropriate burials for victims. The program encouraged COVID-19 vaccination, countering Ebola disinformation, and community acceptance of survivors. The embassy also promoted tolerance, including religious tolerance, indirectly through its democracy and governance activities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12.9 million (midyear 2021). According to the SRA, approximately 85 percent of the population is Muslim, 8 percent is Christian, and 7 percent adheres to indigenous religious beliefs. Much of the Muslim and Christian populations incorporate 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, in the south, and in 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 Transition Charter, published on September 27, states that the country is a secular state and that any act undermining the secular nature of the state or an individual's religious freedom is to be considered a "high crime" punishable by fines and imprisonment. The Charter guarantees the freedom of worship "under the conditions and in the forms provided for by law." The Charter states that any individual who through assault or threats prevents one or more persons from practicing their religion is punishable by one to three months' imprisonment and a fine of 500,000 to one million Guinean Francs (\$54-\$110). The Charter also states that preventing, delaying, or interrupting religious practices in a place of worship by public disturbance is punishable by two to six months' imprisonment and a fine of 500,000 to one million francs (\$54-\$110). In addition, the Charter states that any person who in any way desecrates a place of worship and/or objects of worship within the place of worship may be punished by six months to one year's imprisonment and a fine of 500,000 to one million Francs (\$54-\$110). Anyone who insults a religious leader in the function of his or her duties is may be punished by six months to two years' imprisonment and a fine of 500,000 to one million francs (\$54-\$110). If the individual also threatens, assaults, or injures the religious leader, the punishment is increased to two to five years' imprisonment, with the same fine.

In addition, the Transition Charter stipulates two religious community members serve as representatives on the 81-member National Transition Council (CNT). As of year's end, the CNT had not yet formed.

The 2020 constitution, which was suspended on September 5, stated that the country was a secular state, prohibited religious discrimination, and provided individuals the right to choose and profess their religious faith. It recognized the right of religious institutions and groups to establish and manage themselves freely. It barred political parties that identify with a particular religious group. These rights were subject only to "those limits that are indispensable to maintain the public order and democracy."

The Transition Charter did not change the laws and processes applicable to the registration of religious groups or the overall authorities of the SRA. 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 francs (\$27). 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 imported 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. This prohibition did not change after the September 5 coup.

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 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, which all fall under the SRA. 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 representatives from the Islamic faith and the Catholic, Anglican, and other Protestant churches, as well as the SRA.

Prior to the September 5 coup d'état, a February 18 decree moved the General Secretariat of Religious Affairs directly under the supervision the presidency. On November 6, the transition government returned the General Secretariat of Religious Affairs to a cabinet-level position.

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

Government Practices

On May 13, security forces arrested Imam Nanfo Diaby at his home, under penal code provisions that bar sermons “containing words likely to disturb the public order.” At the time, he was leading Eid al-Fitr prayer in Malinke rather than Arabic, which violated SRA guidelines that mandate Islamic prayers be offered only in Arabic. On May 26, Diaby was sentenced to 12 months’ imprisonment, with six months suspended, and a fine of 500,000 francs (\$54) by the Kankan Court of First Instance. He completed his sentence and was released on October 12. According to Diaby’s lawyers, his appeal was granted on October 5 and his case was pending at year’s end. Diaby was similarly charged with disturbing public order and violating a ban on praying in the local language and suspended from conducting religious activities by the SRA in 2019. In July 2020, he was detained briefly by local SRA authorities for leading prayers in Malinke.

In May, the Regional Secretariat of Religious Affairs in Faranah, Upper Guinea, removed Imam Mohamed Bayo from the list of approved imams in Faranah and forbade him from conducting any religious activity in the region. According to the decision, Bayo was sanctioned due to statements he made during a local radio interview suggesting that it is possible to pray in any language, “since God understands all languages [and not just Arabic].”

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 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 due to a lack of funding and resources.

The government forbade gatherings for evening prayers during the last 10 days of Ramadan in May because of rising COVID-19 cases. The press reported numerous protests against the decision across the country, with multiple arrests and one person shot and killed by security forces in Kerouane, Upper Guinea. On May 6, following protests related to the prayer ban, religious authorities suspended seven

imams and barred one, Elhadj Moussa Doumbouya, from preaching within the Kankan urban commune. All seven were sanctioned for inciting violence, leading protests, and violating the prayer ban. According to local press sources, one imam was arrested and released, and all the other previously suspended imams were reinstated in August except for Moussa Doumbouya, who remained barred from preaching at the end of the year. This followed the government opening all places of worship in September 2020 after religious leaders publicly called for a lifting of COVID-19 restrictions.

On September 17, media reported that security forces prevented local Wahhabi Islam followers from attending Friday prayers in Misside Hinde near Labe, Middle Guinea. Authorities closed the mosque after a complaint was filed by the predominantly Tijaniyah Sufist prefecture's Islamic League, a civil society organization that closely follows SRA guidance. According to the decision, the mosque was closed for failing to conform with guidance governing places of worship, since it had not received the necessary authorizations for its construction. Press reported that although the mosque had existed for more than 20 years, Labe religious authorities remained reluctant to permit Friday prayers there due to concerns regarding what they termed historic tensions between the more fundamentalist Wahhabis and the more moderate Tijaniyah Sufi worshipers in the town.

Neither Jehovah's Witnesses nor the Baha'i community requested official recognition during the year. The Baha'is stated they preferred not to have a formal relationship with the SRA, since their lack of recognition and not being subject to government regulation, such as the SRA control over sermon content, allowed them more freedom.

Islamic schools continued to be 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.

Many Muslim students not enrolled in private Islamic schools continued to receive 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, allowing 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 part-time public or private schools that taught the compulsory curriculum.

The government continued to allocate 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

According to media and Catholic Church sources, a series of long-running property disputes between the Catholic Saint-Jean Monastery in Kendoumaya, Lower Guinea, and local Muslim Susu villagers continued during the year. Villagers continued to claim parcels of land near the monastery, which they began selling to third parties in 2020. In addition, according to media sources, villagers said they believed that the Church had not honored its commitments from earlier negotiations to pave the main road from Coyah to Kendoumaya, provide electricity to the village, and build a local school. The Church stated that it made no such commitments.

On September 22, local Muslim Susu residents attacked Saint-Jean Monastery, seeking to occupy more of the disputed land. After a monk fired warning shots from a shotgun to disperse the crowd, villagers assaulted and dragged him to the home of a local neighborhood elder, then returned him to the monastery. Security forces later arrived to disperse the crowd. No charges were filed and there were no arrests. The monk suffered only minor injuries. By year's end, several lawsuits over the land dispute continued in the courts. On June 15, the Coyah Court of First Instance ruled in favor of the Catholic Church regarding one of the disputed parcels of land. The court also awarded 150 million francs (\$16,200) to the Church as compensation for damages suffered due to local citizens' occupying and dividing some of the property since the dispute began in 2016. On October 22, the Church held a press conference at which it publicly requested the transitional government uphold and implement the June 15 court ruling, but the transition government took no action on the issue by year's end. A 2020 appeal by the

Church against a separate lower court ruling in favor of the villagers was pending with the Supreme Court at year's end.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials met on multiple occasions with the Secretary General of Religious Affairs and religious leaders before and after the coup d'etat to discuss religious tolerance, reconciliation, and social cohesion among religious group.

Embassy officials also met 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 to discuss the same issues and the historic role religious leaders have played in mediating local conflict.

The Charge d'Affaires and previous participants in a U.S.-funded Young African Leaders Initiative helped clean the Fadiga Mosque in the Nongo neighborhood of Conakry during Ramadan. The Charge d'Affaires used this opportunity to speak of the importance of religious tolerance and building links between various faith communities, particularly during Ramadan.

In February, as part of the response to an Ebola outbreak, an embassy-funded communication and engagement program brought together more than 120 Muslim and Christian leaders to encourage dialogue among local government authorities, public health officials, and religious leaders to accommodate religiously appropriate burials for Ebola victims. The program also encouraged vaccination, countering Ebola disinformation, and community acceptance of survivors.

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

The embassy also promoted tolerance indirectly through its democracy and governance activities. The Charge d'Affaires gave remarks during the closing ceremony for an embassy-funded program that sought to build religious tolerance and social cohesion through engaging local civil society, government, media, and

religious groups. Additional embassy activities included engagement with influential local figures, including religious leaders, to amplify peace-building messages in communities afflicted by interethnic and religious tensions.