

NIGER 2021 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. Faith-based organizations are composed of Muslim and Christian groups and the Interfaith Dialogue Organization. The 2019 National Worship Strategy was not yet implemented by year's end. The strategy states that religions are to supervise and manage themselves with the intent of promoting peaceful coexistence, preventing radicalization and religious extremism, and strengthening interreligious dialogue. The Ministry of Interior has the authority under the strategy to "screen preachers, in a bid to prevent risks of instability and insecurity that could be motivated by some preaching." The government provided guidance on sermons and banned some religious leaders from preaching for violating the guidelines, including one who was arrested and briefly detained. Following the announcement of the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in early 2020, 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. In April 2021, the council issued a statement urging Muslims to abide by the government's COVID-19 prevention measures during Ramadan, including the ban on large public gatherings, and urged Muslim leaders and preachers to continue COVID-19 awareness campaigns. Large numbers of Muslims reportedly prayed at mosques the day after these announcements were made. Protesters rioted in several locations following implementation of these COVID-19 prevention measures.

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, as well as from Boko Haram, a terrorist organization based in northeastern Nigeria and active in southeastern Niger's Lake Chad region. Media reported numerous terrorist attacks during the year, including one during an Eid al-Fitr celebration that killed five persons and another in which perpetrators set fire to a Catholic church and killed men trying to escape.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy representatives advocated 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 and in regular meetings with Catholic Archbishop of Niamey Laurent Lompo. The embassy continued to sponsor nationwide programs with religious leaders focused on countering violent extremism by amplifying voices of religious tolerance. For example, embassy assistance given to the design of new education programming, in consultation with traditional and religious leaders, included scrutinizing school curricula 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 23.6 million (midyear 2021). According to the Ministry of Interior, more than 98 percent of the population is Muslim. Of the Muslim population, the great majority is Sunni. Roman Catholics, Protestants, and other religious groups account for less than 2 percent of the population. There are several hundred Baha'is, who reside primarily in Niamey and in communities west 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, provided 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 (NGOs) 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 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 national security 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). According to the Ministry of Interior, private Quranic schools, established solely to teach the Quran without providing other education, are unregulated. They are officially considered to be denominational schools falling under the Ministry of the Interior, not benefiting from public subsidies. They depend on lay teachers with unstable and often low incomes. Sources state they are educational structures of variable quality, normally tending to impart formal learning of Quranic recitation and a

number of doctrinal and social elements of Islam. 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

The government provided guidance on sermons and banned some religious leaders from preaching for violating the guidelines, including Cheikh Assoumana Mahamadou from the Dan Gao neighborhood in Niamey, who was jailed in July 2020 and banned from preaching. The government also instructed the state-run media to boycott Cheikh Mahamadou.

On March 12, criminal police arrested Cheikh Amadou Ali Tchamay of the Goudel Friday Mosque in Niamey following his Friday sermon in which he reportedly mentioned the recent presidential election and the name of the opposition candidate Mahamane Ousmane. The government deployed army tanks in Goudel, a neighborhood considered an opposition party stronghold. The imam was later released, but authorities compelled him to sign a commitment letter banning him from “talking politics” in his preaching.

In April, the High Islamic Council issued a statement, as it had the previous year, 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.

Following the implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures that discouraged collective prayer gatherings of more than 50 persons, protesters rioted in several locations, burning tires and damaging property. In April, there were reports of dozens of angry protesters in Maradi Region setting fire to more than 40 schools, the local gendarmerie office, and administrative vehicles. In all five communes of Niamey, there were reports of protesters setting fire to tires, erecting barricades,

and throwing rocks and projectiles at antiriot units. Police used tear gas to disperse a protest in the Goudel commune before Friday afternoon prayers.

During the year, the government faced challenges including COVID-19 restrictions that shut down the airport and curbed tourism, civil unrest, and the runoff to a presidential election that concluded in March. Sources stated it did not make progress in implementing the 2019 National Worship Strategy. 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. This strategy grants the government the power to regulate and oversee the construction, financing, and use of places of worship and other religious facilities and was perceived by some observers as a potential way to encroach on religious freedom.

According to the government, media, and religious groups, the country had become a focal point for Islamist armed groups. Following rapid growth of Wahhabism in the country, the government in recent years sought to standardize Islamic practices through the creation of an Islamic forum of more than 50 national Islamic organizations. The government established the Islamic Forum in 2017 to standardize the practice of Islam and prevent the spread of Islamic extremism. As part of its effort to stop the spread of Wahhabism, the government used provisions of the 2019 law to investigate and control the sources of funding of religious denominations.

Government officials continued to express concern regarding funding from foreign government sources for the construction of mosques and the training of imams, but according to observers, the government had insufficient resources to track the extent of the funding and fully understand its consequences.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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, as well as from 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 hundreds of civilians and

security forces, according to media. Boko Haram and ISIS-WA continued regular attacks in Diffa Region in the Lake Chad Basin, while ISIS-GS and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) increased attacks in the border areas with Mali and Burkina Faso. Armed groups also reportedly conducted targeted campaigns of killing and threats against what they called “informants,” including local government officials, traditional leaders, and security forces. ISIS-GS and JNIM affiliates in northern Tillaberi Region reportedly continued charging local villagers Islamic taxes (*zakat*), while members of terrorist organizations in western Tillaberi Region reportedly burned government-funded schools, telling villagers their children should not attend secular schools and forcing many villagers to flee their homes.

According to *Africanews.com*, terrorists killed five persons and seriously injured two others during an attack on the town of Fantio, in Tillaberi Region. The attack occurred during an Eid al-Fitr celebration.

According to Catholic aid organization Aid to the Church in Need, a terrorist attack occurred in the towns of Fantio and Dolbel in Tillaberi Region in which the perpetrators set fire to a Catholic church and killed men who were trying to escape.

Christian groups active in the country included missions, associations, movements, and NGOs. Many associations and missions provided humanitarian assistance as well as built schools and churches. NGOs also provided services to communities, including water points and other humanitarian assistance.

The Interfaith Dialogue Organization, with both Muslim and Christian members, continued to meet in committees in all eight regions of the country and in local committees in 140 communes of the country.

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 an interreligious forum. Public events generally begin with an Islamic prayer. Some gatherings, however, began adding a Christian prayer to their opening blessing.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy representatives advocated 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 also had regular meetings with Catholic Archbishop of Niamey Laurent Lompo, who is the country's first Nigerien Archbishop and has held his position since 2015. They discussed trends in religious observance in the Muslim community (Lompo cited a strong influence from Arab countries) and the role that Lompo stated that inequity contributed to recruitment for violent extremist organizations, noting that economic incentives were encouraging volunteers. Other topics included girls' lack of access to education and the ramifications of child, early, and forced marriage.

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 seen as driving factors, such as education for all and reducing early marriage. The Ambassador met with the president of the Islamic Association, who is also 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. For example, embassy assistance given to the design of new education programming, in consultation with traditional and religious leaders, included scrutinizing school curricula and texts for content contrary to the principles of religious freedom and tolerance.