

BURKINA FASO 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares that the country is a secular state. The constitution and other laws provide for the right of individuals to choose and change their religion and to practice the religion of their choice. Religious organizations may register with the government but are not required to register unless they seek legal recognition by the government. After registration, the organizations must comply with applicable regulations imposed on all registered organizations or be subject to a fine.

In the face of a worsening security situation, military officers led by Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandago Damiba deposed elected President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré in a coup d'état on January 24 and became president of a transition government. In a second military uprising on September 30, Damiba was ousted by Captain Ibrahim Traoré. During both the January coup and the September military takeover, religious leaders served as mediators to try to prevent bloodshed. On February 25, then Transition President Damiba met with religious and customary leaders and stated terrorism in the country was mainly internally driven because it was Burkinabe citizens who had taken up arms against their country. In March, a new government was formed and included for the first time a Ministry for Religious and Customary Affairs. On July 12, Transition Prime Minister Albert Ouédraogo led a delegation to attend the installation ceremony of the new president of the Federation of Islamic Associations of Burkina (FAIB). Then Transition Minister for Religious and Customary Affairs Issaka Sourwema, who was part of the delegation, praised the contributions of the Muslim community for their efforts to promote peace and social cohesion in the country. Throughout their time in office, President Damiba and other transition government officials condemned the stigmatization of vulnerable communities and warned against extremist sermons. The authorities which took power following the September 30 military takeover disbanded the Ministry of Religious and Customary Affairs and distributed its functions to other ministries. Despite these changes, transition authorities maintained policies permitting the free practice of religion in areas they controlled.

International and local media outlets reported that terrorist groups, armed insurgents, and jihadists expanded their control, continued their campaign of violence, and sometimes targeted places of worship or religious leaders. Domestic and transnational terrorist groups conducted more attacks and inflicted more violence against civilians than in 2021, including numerous targeted killings based on religious identity, according to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Deaths attributed to terrorism rose to 1,135 in 2022 from 759 in 2021, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace Global Terrorism Index. Terrorists killed or kidnapped imams, other clergy, and worshippers, while attacking and destroying mosques, churches, and animists' places of worship. Although the identity of those responsible for many attacks was unknown, observers attributed most attacks to Ansaroul Islam, Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISIS-GS), and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), all designated by the U.S. government as terrorist organizations. Media reported numerous incidents of terrorist violence. Media and international NGOs reported that violent extremist organizations enforced their ideology and interpretation of Islamic law in the region with the threat of violence for noncompliance. For example, attackers forced members of communities in the northern part of the country to dress in specific "Islamic" garb, although observers noted this was also occurring across other areas of the country. Terrorists closed and burned schools and killed teachers for using a secular curriculum and for teaching in French rather than Arabic, according to media reports. As of December, 6,253 schools had been closed, depriving nearly 700,000 students of access to education. More than 76 municipalities were declared to be completely outside the education system. On October 28, Education Minister Joseph André Ouédraogo characterized the impact of insecurity on education as "extremely serious."

Human rights organizations and religious groups continued to express concern that religiously targeted violence had harmed the traditional peaceful coexistence of religious groups in the country. Academic and other observers stated there was stigmatization of the mostly Muslim ethnic Fulani community because of the community's perceived sympathy for Islamists, which further aggravated existing societal tensions. Members of the Burkinabe Muslim Community Organization, the Catholic Archdiocese of Ouagadougou, and the Federation of Evangelical Churches continued to state that despite an increase in religiously motivated attacks, religious tolerance remained a common value, citing numerous examples of families of mixed faiths and religious leaders attending each other's holidays

and celebrations. Members of the largest religious communities promoted interfaith dialogue and tolerance through public institutions such as the FAIB, which conducted campaigns promoting interfaith dialogue throughout the country. During the September military takeover, religious leaders worked to avoid bloodshed between the warring factions.

U.S. embassy officials conducted discussions with a wide range of transition government agencies and officials, including in the Office of the President, on the continued increase in religiously motivated attacks, particularly in the Sahel and Est Regions. On May 23 and September 16, the Ambassador met with the then Minister of Religious and Customary Affairs to discuss his priorities and ways to protect religious freedom. During the September meeting, the Ambassador expressed concern over increasing extremist sermons and preaching in some religious denominations.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador met with imams and other Muslim leaders, as well as Catholic and Protestant leaders, to reinforce U.S. support for religious freedom and tolerance and to hear their concerns. The Ambassador also conveyed appreciation for religious leaders who acted as mediators to prevent violence. In addition, embassy officers met with religious leaders to encourage and promote values of religious freedom, interfaith tolerance, and active civil dialogue on these subjects. During the year, the embassy conducted regular outreach with religious figures and religiously oriented civil society organization leaders to better understand threats to religious freedom and tolerance in the country as a result of the unprecedented level of violence against both Christians and Muslims.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 21.9 million (mid-year 2022). According to the 2019 census, the most recent available, 63.8 percent of the population are Muslim (predominantly Sunni), 20.1 percent Roman Catholic, 6.2 percent belong to various Protestant groups, and 9.0 percent maintain exclusively Indigenous beliefs. Less than one percent of the population are atheists or belong to other religious groups. Statistics on religious affiliation are approximate because Muslims and Christians often adhere simultaneously to some aspects of traditional or animist religious beliefs.

Muslims reside largely in the northern, eastern, and western border regions, while Christians are concentrated in the center of the country. Traditional and animist religious beliefs are practiced throughout the country, especially in rural communities. The capital has a mixed Muslim and Christian population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states the country is secular, and both the constitution and other laws provide for the right of individuals to choose and change their religion and to practice the religion of their choice. The constitution states freedom of belief is subject to respect for law, public order, good morals, and “the human person.” Political parties based on religion, ethnicity, or regional affiliation are forbidden.

The law provides that all organizations, religious or otherwise, may register with the Ministry of Territorial Administration, Decentralization and Security (MATDS), which oversees religious affairs. Registration confers legal status, and the process usually takes three to four weeks and costs less than 50,000 CFA francs (\$81). Religious organizations are not required to register unless they seek legal recognition by the government, but after registration they must comply with applicable regulations imposed on all registered organizations or be subject to a fine of 50,000 to 150,000 CFA francs (\$81 to \$243). The transition government taxes religious groups if they engage in commercial activities, such as farming or dairy production.

The Directorate for Customary Affairs and Worship was moved from the former MATDS to the new Ministry of Territorial Administration and Security (MATS) in month. MATS helps organize religious pilgrimages; promotes and fosters interreligious dialogue and peace; develops and implements measures for the construction of places of worship and the registration of religious organizations and religious congregations; and monitors the implementation of standards for burial, exhumation, and transfer of remains (which may include religious elements).

Religious groups operate under the same regulatory framework for publishing and broadcasting as other entities. MATDS may request copies of proposed publications and broadcasts to verify they are in accordance with the nature of the religious group as stated in its registration. MATDS also reviews permit applications by religious groups.

The transition government generally does not fund religious schools or require them to pay taxes unless they conduct for-profit activities. The transition government, however, provides subsidies to a number of Catholic schools as part of an agreement allowing students from public schools to enroll in Catholic schools when public schools are at full capacity. The transition government also provides subsidies to registered Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim (commonly referred to as “Franco-Arabic”) schools for teacher salaries, which were typically less than those of public-school teachers.

Religious education is not allowed in public schools. Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant groups operate private primary and secondary schools and some institutions of higher education. These schools are permitted to provide religious instruction to their students. Private schools (religious or not) must submit the names of their directors to the government and register with the Ministry of National Education and Literacy. The transition government does not appoint or approve these officials, however. The transition government periodically reviews the curricula of new religious schools as they open, as well as others, to ensure they offer the standard academic curriculum. A majority of Quranic schools are not registered, and thus, their curricula are not reviewed.

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

Government Practices

During a period of continued deteriorating security, a group of military officers led by Lt. Col. Paul Henry Sandaogo Damiba overthrew democratically elected President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré in a coup d'état on January 24. Damiba became president of a transition government, a position he held until he and the other officers were overthrown during another military takeover led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré on September 30.

On February 24, then Transition President Damiba consulted religious and customary leaders from the regions most affected by terrorism; observers said this action indicated Damiba was aware that the security crisis had exacerbated intercommunal tensions and aggravated social fractures in the country. Damiba, like his predecessor, acknowledged that most terrorist combatants were Burkinabe citizens and not foreigners. In March, the Damiba-led transition government appointed a Minister for Religious and Customary Affairs for the first time in the country's history and reinstated the position of Minister for Social Cohesion and National Reconciliation with the aim of preventing radicalization and violent extremism and promoting social cohesion and tolerance. On March 16, then Transition Minister for Religious and Customary Affairs Sourwema met with Sunni leaders and asked them to urge worshippers to avoid extreme postings on social media.

On July 12, then Transition Prime Minister Albert Ouédraogo led a delegation to the installation of the new president of the FAIB. At the ceremony, Minister Sourwema praised the Muslim community for its efforts to promote peace and social cohesion in the country and reaffirmed the transition government's support for the new FAIB leadership.

On April 13, the transition government announced the establishment of "local dialogue committees for the restoration of peace." Then Transition Minister for Social Cohesion and National Reconciliation Yero Boly characterized the committees as local initiatives to encourage the return of young Burkinabe citizens who had joined armed terrorist groups and who wished to lay down their arms. Boly told media outlets, "This is an initiative that brings hope for the return of peace to the areas concerned through intercommunity and intracommunity reconciliation." The dialogue committees included local representatives in areas affected by terrorism and violent extremism.

In May, senior transition government officials announced that humanitarian needs would be integrated into "deradicalization centers" to encourage more young men to renounce violent extremism.

During Ramadan in April, Boly led a transition government delegation to the FAIB headquarters for a collective breaking of the fast, after which he stressed the

need for all citizens, regardless of religious denomination, to take responsibility for the security situation in the country.

Transition authorities condemned the stigmatization of vulnerable communities and the use of violent rhetoric. The government said it was aware that action, including interfaith dialogue, was needed to control hate speech and other activities that could affect social cohesion.

On June 1, Minister Sourwema addressed the Council of Ministers on the resurgence of radical religious discourse and proposed possible responses, including strengthening control of religious discourse and preaching, limiting the influence of religion in the political arena, and reaffirming the secular character of the state.

On Tabaski (the local name for Eid al-Adha), in July, Prime Minister Ouédraogo visited the headquarters of FAIB, saying, “This is proof of cohesion and unity. It is proof that we have the pillars of living together.”

In August, the transition government condemned calls for violence against the ethnic Fulani community, which had been targeted for violence and harassment because many Fulani have been recruited by extremist groups. These calls, in the form of audio recordings posted mainly on WhatsApp, urged the local population of the southwest of the country to attack and kill Fulani. The authors of the posts were not identified. In a statement adopted by the Council of Ministers, the government spokesperson and Minister of Education at the time, Lionel Bilgo, wrote, “These are remarks of extreme gravity only equaled by the excesses of the Mille Collines radio station which led to the Rwandan genocide [in 1994], one of the worst tragedies of humanity and from which we must learn lessons.”

On May 20, the Criminal Court of Tenkodogo, Boulgou Province, Centre-Est Region, convicted 11 persons for willful destruction of bars and restaurants in nearby Beguedo in March. The defendants, who also destroyed houses and other buildings, said that as Muslims, they were offended by the morally corrupt establishments in the town. They set fire to at least nine bars that they accused of promoting prostitution. After the incident, police detained 31 persons, including a former mayor of the commune and the muezzin of the mosque where meetings had taken place to prepare the attacks.

The transition government stated that terrorists attacked religious institutions with the aim of dividing the population. In contrast, transition government representatives took actions they said were intended to foster peaceful cohabitation between communities and followers of different religions. On March 19, Minister Sourwema and his close aides met with the Association of Quranic Teachers of Burkina (AAMCB), a group that wrote to the Transition President Damiba to ask for reinstatement of the death penalty, legalization of “female circumcision” (female genital mutilation/cutting), allowing Quranic students to beg in the streets (in opposition to government efforts to prohibit child labor and panhandling), and lowering the existing minimum marriage age of 17 for girls. Same sex-marriage was also rejected by the teachers’ association as anti-Islam. According to minutes of the meeting, the ministry rejected the teachers’ demands, stating that no religious or ethnic community should use its strength or numbers to impose its views on others. Ministry representatives also said that all citizens must respect the laws established by the legislature.

On August 25, Boly chaired the opening ceremony of the national conference of religious, customary, and traditional leaders in Ouagadougou. He urged Minister Sourwema to ensure the supervision of sermons, teachings, programs, and messages conveyed by religious leaders and denominational media in order to avoid the dissemination of hate speech that could contribute to radicalization and violent extremism.

In September, the then Ministry of Religious and Customary Affairs supported a dialogue in Bobo Dioulasso (the country’s second largest city) with religious and traditional leaders from western regions of the country on ways to promote nonviolence and social cohesion in the country.

The transition government allocated 75 million CFA francs (\$122,000) each to the Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and animist communities, the same level as in previous years. Sources continued to state that the funding was meant to demonstrate equitable government support to all religious groups in the country.

On June 6, the then Ministry for Religious and Customary Affairs announced that it was granting 800 million CFA francs (\$1.3 million) for Muslim pilgrimages in 2022.

In September, the same ministry also announced an “inclusive and equitable review of state subsidies” to schools belonging to religious denominations. The reform was meant to address complaints from Quranic and Franco-Arab schools that had not benefitted from state support. All subsequent reviews and reforms, however, were delayed due to the military takeover in September.

According to religious group leaders, the transition government continued to routinely approve applications from religious groups for registration, although some applications were rejected on “moral” grounds, such as the character of the person or group, unlawful conduct of the group’s activities, and lack of transparency in disclosing the group’s sources of income.

In May, officials from the then Ministry of Religious and Customary Affairs suggested that secularism was at risk due to the unauthorized creation of places of worship and the public manifestation of religious affiliation (e.g., the wearing of religious symbols at school and prayer sites in the workplace). Officials said a bill on religious liberties was ready for adoption by the transition parliament. The draft bill required the government to conduct an “inclusive and equitable review” of state subsidies to religious denominations and the customary community; monitor media and social media through the National Observatory of Religious Facts (ONAFAR) in collaboration with the High Council for Communication and the Commission for Computing and Liberties; supervise the construction of new places of worship; and regulate the public manifestation of religious affiliation (e.g., wearing religious symbols at school). The draft bill also required the government to validate the curriculum of schools and training centers, set rules related to identification of candidates (wearing a veil) during exams, and impose conditions for foreign imams, such as sharing CVs and their proposed teaching content prior to their arrival in the country. As of the end of 2022, the bill remained pending.

On July 26, Minister Sourwema apologized to the FAIB for falsely accusing a Sunni imam from Gombougou, Centre-Sud Region of prohibiting women from his religious community from using public health services where they could be asked to remove their veils. In a letter, Sourwema asked the president of ONAFAR to take up the case, in which he said the imam’s action undermined social cohesion by separating Muslim women from other women. Further investigation

exonerated the imam, according to transition government officials. In an interview in a local language, the imam expressed his compassion for women who suffered due to the significant distances they often had to travel to health centers and the hostile behavior of health workers. He also said he wished to build a health center to serve these women.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Domestic and transnational terrorist groups continued to operate throughout the year and, according to media and NGO reports, increased their killing of individuals based on their religious identity. Deaths attributed to terrorism rose to 1,135 in 2022 from 759 in 2021, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace Global Terrorism Index. The attacks forced more people to flee their villages, bringing more communes under the groups' control, and preventing villagers from farming. The attacks spread to the south and west, the Cascades, Boucle du Mouhoun Regions, the Centre-Sud, Centre-Ouest, Hauts Bassins, and Centre East regions. Terrorist groups included the U.S.-designated terrorist groups Ansaroul Islam, ISIS-GS, JNIM, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, and al-Mourabitoun. Although perpetrators of many attacks in the country were not identified, observers attributed most attacks to three terrorist groups: Ansaroul Islam, JNIM, and ISIS-GS. Media outlets reported that terrorist groups regularly targeted Muslim and Christian clergy, religious congregations, houses of worship, teachers, local government employees, schools, and Muslims they criticized for not practicing a sufficiently conservative form of Islam. According to residents, terrorist groups were also responsible for killing imams whom the terrorist groups accused of collaborating with government security forces.

According to the Ministry of Education, 5,709 schools were closed as of November due to terrorist attacks, depriving nearly one million students of access to education. The NGO Save the Children said the closures represented 22 percent of the educational structures in the country. In addition, an estimated 79 municipalities were declared completely out of the education system. On October 28, Education Minister Ouedraogo characterized the impact of insecurity on education as "extremely serious."

In a number of attacks, militants singled out and killed individuals wearing Christian imagery such as crucifixes, according to media reports and church

leaders. Extremists also urged Muslim and non-Muslim persons to adapt their living styles. Some attacks took place at both Christian and Islamic houses of worship. According to many observers, attacks also targeted Muslims whom the attackers believed were insufficiently rigorous in their practice of Islam.

Some Christians avoided public worship and instead worshipped at home to avoid being targeted by violent extremists, according to media, NGOs, and the government. In Botou, in Gnagna Province, for example, after the pastor's departure, members of an evangelical Christian church continued to worship at home. The Catholic Parish Saint Paul of Sandikpenga in the Est region closed permanently following terrorist attacks, including arson, in 2021, and church leaders advised parishioners to pray in their homes.

In September, Evangelical Christian pastor Pierre Bayala, a member of the Federation of Churches and Evangelical Missions (FEME), reported that since 2018, 200 pastors had been displaced and five pastors killed by terrorists. He also said that worshippers found ways to practice their faiths at home or, in some cases, had been forced to adapt to the militants' demands.

In August, for safety reasons, the annual Catholic commemoration of the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary took place on the grounds of the Cathedral Church of Christ the King of the Universe of Ouahigouya and not at its usual location on the Marian hill of Saye in the suburbs of Naaba Kango. Security guards were deployed at the church during the commemoration.

On June 27, JNIM militants killed eight civilians in Sandiaga, in Koulpelogo Province, Centre Est Region, while they were attending a Christian baptism.

On October 12, presumed Islamic militants ordered the closure of three churches in Samou, near Bogande in the Est Region. Militants also ordered citizens to wear short trousers, grow beards, and sell their pigs.

On October 11, members of a violent extremist organization killed four persons in their home and left seven missing at Gaigou and Salmossi in Oudalan Province. The victims included a marabout (a Muslim holy man and religious teacher) believed by some to be endowed with magic powers.

In April, a Catholic nun was taken hostage by militants linked to JNIM, in the parish of Yalgo, in the center of the country. According to Catholic officials, in August, the militants released the nun in Niger.

On March 17, militants entered the villages of Hynga, Kongaye, and Badalgou in Gnagna Province, Est Region, and ordered residents to adopt Islamic practices. They demanded that women wear the full veil, prohibited merchants from selling alcoholic beverages, and burned documents belonging to the school in Badalgou.

In February, militants belonging to JNIM attacked and set fire to the Petit Seminaire, a training center for Catholic priests at Boudi. JNIM militants burned two dormitories and a classroom, stole a vehicle of a training priest, and ransacked another vehicle. An observer stated the terrorists aimed to kidnap the priests but did not find them.

On October 30, militants entered the village of Ramsa, in Seguenega commune, Yatenga Province, Nord Region, and ordered the closure of the church.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The country's long tradition of religious pluralism and societal respect for differences in religious belief continued to be undermined and threatened during the year by armed groups seeking to spread an extremist ideology. Human rights defenders reported the stigmatization of the predominantly Muslim Fulani ethnic community because of a perceived association with militant Islamist groups. Incidences of violence against Fulani communities in many areas of the country were reported during the year. Some civil liberties groups also noted an increase in the use of religious rhetoric in political speech. In particular, supporters of Transition President Traore prayed and displayed religious signs during demonstrations; they also publicly insulted and threatened religious and traditional leaders.

On November 25, a local court sentenced the traditional chief of the canton of Zomnoogo in Namentenga, Centre-Nord Region, to six months in prison and a fine of 300,000 FCFA (\$490), both suspended, for incitement to hatred and violence. The chief, in a 28-second video that circulated widely on social media, had

threatened to order his followers to kill their Fulani and Muslim “Wahabia” (Sunni) acquaintances if acts of terrorism continued.

According to Dr. Daouda Diallo, leader of the NGO Coalition against Impunity and Communities’ Stigmatization, ethnic Fulani groups practiced moderate Islam until the arrival of terrorists, who forced some to adopt strict Islamic practices.

Members of the FAIB, the Catholic Archdiocese of Ouagadougou, and the Federation of Evangelical Churches continued to state that despite an increase in religiously motivated attacks, religious tolerance remained widespread as a common value, and that numerous examples existed of families of mixed faiths and religious leaders attending each other’s holidays and celebrations. Religious leaders also integrated their youth associations into religious tolerance activities. Members of the largest religious communities promoted interfaith dialogue and tolerance through public institutions such as FAIB, which conducted awareness campaigns throughout the country. They also worked through NGOs such as the Dori-based Fraternal Union of Believers, which encouraged various religious communities, specifically in the Sahel Region, to conduct social and economic development activities with the goal of reducing vulnerability to terrorist recruitment and fostering religious tolerance between communities.

In September, Moussa Kouanda, the president of the FAIB, noted his organization had taken efforts to curb extremist sermons and preaching by imploring imams and theologians to respect places of worship and to stop virulent preaching or face sanctions. He said, “We cannot promise this will end within six months, but with the supervision and training we think we can overcome the problems within our community.” Kouanda also praised the cohesion among other religious leaders.

In September, the Archbishop of Ouagadougou, Cardinal Philippe Ouedraogo, expressed concern over the country’s deteriorating security situation, which he said had forced multiple parishes to close. To foster social cohesion, the Cardinal hosted two breaks of Lenten fasting with Muslims and Christians. The church invited 100 families of displaced Muslims and Christians, who together heard messages of peace. Cardinal Ouedraogo also said the Catholic Church met with priests through their parish delegates in June and September to discuss peaceful coexistence. He added that Protestants, Muslims, and Catholics met together

with the Mogho Naaba, the senior traditional chief of the predominantly Muslim Mossi ethnic group, who had assisted in addressing tensions. In addition to the three parishes closed in Dori Diocese in the Sahel Region, eight of 14 parishes in Kaya Diocese in the Centre Nord Region were also closed. Two parishes closed in the Diocese of Ouahigouya in the Nord Region, while others remained open but under “difficult situations,” as described by the Catholic Church. The Archbishop discussed his initiative to promote interfaith dialogue through the third annual Christian-Islamic and interethnic couples’ pilgrimage to the Marian shrine of Notre Dame de Yagma near Ouagadougou, which took place in June. In month, after visiting the High Security Prison where suspected terrorists were jailed, the Archbishop said he was concerned about Fulani ethnic prisoners dominating prison populations, which could fuel further their stigmatization and tensions with other religious groups.

In September, Pastor Henry Ye, president of the Federation of Evangelical Churches and Missions (FEME), stated that religious dialogue and tolerance were valued among religious leaders in the country and said they always prioritized the interests of their country. He noted that to counter pressures toward radicalization and violent extremism among youth, the FEME held regular exchanges over social media among the youth organizations of religious groups. To promote peaceful coexistence, he said, they held security forums with individuals from other communities to exchange views and experiences with evangelical Christians. According to the pastor, these exchanges were intended to reduce frustration and counter the impulse to retaliate for wrongdoing. He also described how acts of terrorism affected churches. For example, all FEME-associated churches in Yagha Province, Sahel Region, were closed as a result of terrorism or terrorist threats. According to Pastor Ye, more than 500 churches closed, 200 pastors were displaced, and five pastors were killed by terrorists. The most affected churches were from the International Society of Missionaries (ISM). In some locations, churches closed, but worshippers conducted services at home.

Religious leaders continued to say that the foundation of interfaith dialogue in the country helped them resist and survive various crises over time, including the challenge to interreligious and ethnic cohesion posed by terrorism. Religious leaders also noted they considered themselves as “shock absorbers” to address some of the most pressing issues facing the country.

As in previous years, new Muslim and Protestant congregations continued to form without approval or oversight from existing Muslim and Protestant federations. Religious leaders said that messages of tolerance by Muslim and Protestant federations were often undermined by small new religious groups that did not fall under their oversight and that took positions counter to the federations' views. The congregations said the lack of cohesion and oversight made it difficult for official religious groups to monitor and regulate the activities and messages of new groups and to participate in the national campaign against extremist and violent discourse by religious leaders.

In June, the Muslim Community of Burkina Faso stated during the installation of its new president that the group's cardinal principle was "Islam of the golden mean," which was incompatible with fanaticism and religious extremism. FAIB President Kouanda promised to work for cohesion and the return of peace to the country. In August, the FAIB issued a statement encouraging the government in its efforts to eradicate insecurity and encouraged the government to continue discussion of religious issues.

Also in August, the FAIB conducted a training seminar for 800 Imams from all regions of the country under the theme, "Islamic discourse in a context of insecurity." During the seminar, FAIB instructed its imams and preachers to promote national reconciliation, restore social cohesion, and generally mobilize members to fight insecurity. Kouanda declared when opening the event, "In Burkina, we have more than 8,000 villages, and in each village there is at least one or two imams. And each imam, five times a day, has more than a thousand people behind him so if these people pass the message, it could be productive for peace and social cohesion in the country."

In September, Kouanda and other FAIB leaders said that poor governance had led to the lack of supervision and government-provided resources to Quranic schools and talibes (Quranic school students). Kouanda stated that the problem was particularly bad in the Sahel Region, where schools remained open, despite insecurity. He explained that Quranic schools were not supervised, had limited food for children, and could not pay their teachers, making them vulnerable to recruitment by violent groups.

In June, the Coordination of Young Muslims of Burkina Faso (CJMB) accused the government of seeking to control religious discourse. The organization was reacting to statements by the Transitional Minister of Religious and Customary Affairs, who announced actions to regulate the exercise of religious freedoms and worship in the country. CJMB Vice President Boubacar Dianda said such actions would be “a measure of muzzling of religious leaders.” He added, “If this measure seems to concern all religious denominations, [then] Islam feels targeted and the Umma is frustrated at all levels up to the elderly.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials raised the continued increase in religiously motivated attacks, particularly in the Sahel, Nord, Ouest, Sud-Ouest, and Est Regions, with government officials, including those in the Ministry of Religious and Customary Affairs (MARC), the Ministry of Defense, and the Office of the President. Embassy officers regularly discussed events and policies affecting religious freedom with the MARC and the director general for traditional beliefs, including the equitable registration process for religious groups, a draft law on religious freedom, equitable treatment of religious groups by the government, and the relationships between the government and different religious groups.

On May 23, the Ambassador met then Minister of Religious and Customary Affairs Sourwema to discuss the role of the new ministry and the actions it planned to undertake to quell the rise of sermons preaching violence. The Ambassador also raised the status of a draft bill containing reforms to better supervise the interventions of foreign clerics, and the creation of new places of worship.

The Ambassador and embassy officials met separately with Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant religious leaders to encourage their efforts to promote interfaith dialogue, advocate religious tolerance and freedom, and support an end to stigmatization. During these meetings with religious leaders, many of them discussed the impact of violent extremism on the country’s tradition of peaceful coexistence of religious groups and shared their efforts to maintain cohesion.

On September 12, the Ambassador met with Cardinal Ouedraogo to discuss support from the international community to end terrorist violence in the country.

On September 8, the Ambassador visited the headquarters of FAIB to convey her appreciation to the new leadership for their efforts to quell virulent preaching and sermons.

On September 6, the Ambassador visited the headquarters of FEME and discussed the impact of violent extremism on interreligious and intrareligious tensions and the spread of ethnic division.

On November 3, the Ambassador hosted a roundtable with representatives of religious associations and NGOs working on interfaith dialogue. During the discussions, the Ambassador shared her concerns over social cohesion in an environment of proliferating hate speech, verbal attacks disseminated through social media, and physical attacks targeting members of ethnic and religious groups. Embassy officials also discussed giving more exposure to the voices and views of persons supporting interfaith dialogue to promote increased social cohesion. During the meeting, one of the participants stated, “Burkinabe [people] have not changed; it is the circumstances and the difficulties that have shaped the Burkinabe.” According to the participant, underlying problems such as land disputes, economic difficulties, and the absence of access to justice often led to hate speech among ethnic and religious groups. The Ambassador raised the value of informal religious and customary groups in promoting social cohesion and preventing crises. Participants also discussed the institutionalization of informal dialogue among religious and customary leaders to encourage the ongoing resolution of societal problems.

Embassy representatives used social media platforms to reinforce messaging that promoted religious freedom and tolerance and organized events around themes of religious tolerance and mutual understanding, including hosting an embassy iftar during Ramadan. The Ambassador regularly raised the need to counter threats to the country’s tradition of religious freedom and tolerance.

Embassy officials organized or supported several activities to respond to the social divisions between religious groups. The embassy supported training for religious leaders on building tolerance and stability in their communities, conflict management, and fostering inter- and intrareligious cohesion. The embassy also supported a grant to reach communities in the most insecure parts of the country

and to engage religious leaders and others in those areas to promote peace and social cohesion. The embassy provided the Association for Religious Tolerance and Interfaith Dialogue a grant for activities such as advocacy, awareness campaigns, public messaging, community inclusion efforts, and conflict prevention.