

NIGER 2022 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.

In February, authorities arrested Muslim cleric Alfa Ali Boubacar and charged him with “production and dissemination of information prejudicial to public order and incitement of violence.” He was arrested and charged because he uttered a fatwa against the regime and criticized the government for its “poor management of security in the Tillabéri Region [and] the presence of French troops in the country.” He was briefly released from prison in April, after a recommendation from the Forum on Peace, Security, and Development, a collaboration of government officials, scholars, and business leaders from the country’s western Tillabéri Region. Authorities subsequently rearrested him, and at year’s end he remained imprisoned in Filingué prison.

The government did not achieve its stated intent to fully implement the 2019 National Worship Strategy by the end of the year due to resource and capacity constraints. The government provided guidance on sermons and encouraged preachers to focus on promoting national unity, brotherhood, and peaceful coexistence in their sermons, through the media, or in public places such as market stalls or occasional ceremonies.

The government 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,” as well as from Boko Haram, a terrorist organization based in northeastern Nigeria and active in southeastern Niger’s Lake Chad region. On March 7 and 8, Boko Haram attacked and killed 20 villagers in the country’s eastern Diffa region. Media reported numerous terrorist attacks during the year. Security threats include continued deadly attacks in the country’s Tillabéri Region. In response, the government launched air strikes in Tamou, a gold-mining town in the Tillabéri Region, that killed dozens of civilians. The government stated that the casualties were terrorists, but the Panafrican

Network for Peace, Democracy, and Development (REPPAD), a human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO), conducted an independent investigation and released a report that stated the casualties were civilians. In response to REPPAD's report, authorities arrested the coordinator of REPPAD and detained him for several weeks before releasing him.

Christian groups active in the country included missions, associations, movements, and NGOs. 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. The organization also conducted a series of workshops for Muslim and Christian religious leaders and students on the theme of "Peaceful Coexistence in the Quran and the Bible."

The Chargé d'Affaires and other U.S. embassy representatives conveyed messages of religious tolerance in meetings with Muslim and Christian representatives. The Chargé spoke with a prominent imam and the Catholic Archbishop at the embassy's Fourth of July celebration. The Chargé also met with the Imam of Niamey to express solidarity with the country's Muslims on Eid al-Fitr. During the month of Ramadan, the embassy held an iftar at which Christians, Baha'is, and Muslims discussed shared beliefs such as religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the current total population at 24.45 million (midyear 2022). According to the Ministry of Interior, more than 98 percent of the population is Muslim. Of the Muslim population, the great majority is Sunni. Approximately 80 percent of the country's Muslims are Sunni of the Maliki school of jurisprudence, while 20 percent are nondenominational Muslims. Roman Catholics, Protestants, and other religious groups account for less than 2 percent of the population. There are several hundred Baha'i, 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 due to the influence of countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Kuwait.

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 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 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 the concealing of bombs and weapons.

The government prohibits open air, public proselytization events by all religious groups due to 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 and do not benefit 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, although 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. State-controlled media outlets broadcast sermons from “approved imams or preachers” in which they discouraged violence or any attempt to criticize the government.

In February, authorities arrested Muslim cleric Alfa Ali Boubacar and charged him with “production and dissemination of information prejudicial to public order and incitement of violence,” specifically, because he uttered a fatwa against the regime during a prayer he conducted and criticized the government for its “poor management of security in the Tillabéri Region [and]the presence of French troops in the country.” The criticism was also in response to the 2021 killings of three young Nigerien protestors by French soldiers. Additionally, he stated that the victims of a raid conducted by the military in Tamou District were gold miners, rather than terrorists. Boubacar was briefly released from prison in April, after a recommendation from the Forum on Peace, Security, and Development, but authorities rearrested him, and at year’s end he remained imprisoned in Filingué Prison.

The government launched air strikes in Tamou, a gold-mining town in the Tillabéri Region, that killed dozens of civilians. The government stated that the casualties were terrorists, but REPPAD, a human rights NGO, conducted an independent investigation and released a report that stated the casualties were civilians. In response to REPPAD’s report, authorities arrested the coordinator of REPPAD, Abdoulaye Seydou, and detained him for several weeks before releasing him.

The government did not achieve its stated intent to fully implement the 2019 National Worship Strategy by the end of the year due to resource and capacity constraints. The scarcity of law enforcement personnel and the resistance of the country’s citizens to laws they consider coercive further hindered the government’s efforts. The Ministry of Interior used the authority it had under the National Worship 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 encouraged preachers to focus on promoting national unity, brotherhood, and peaceful coexistence in their sermons, through the media, or in public places such as market stalls or occasional ceremonies.

The government ensured there was an adequate number of designated areas for women and persons with disabilities to pray in public and government-owned buildings. The government also fully respected both Muslim and Christian holidays, as required by law.

Actions of Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

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,” 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-Q’aida, 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 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 the northern part of Tillabéri Region reportedly continued to charge local villagers Islamic taxes (zakat), while members of terrorist organizations in the west of the Tillabéri Region reportedly burned government-funded schools and told villagers their children should not attend secular schools. Many villagers were forced to flee their homes. According to the government, as of August, at least 890 public schools – 855 primary and 35 secondary – had closed in the country’s western region, mostly in Tillabéri, because of insecurity.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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. The organization also conducted a series of workshops for Muslim and Christian religious leaders and students on the theme of “Peaceful Coexistence in the Quran and the Bible.” Additionally, it led media sensitization programs promoting peace and disseminated training manuals

written by a Nigerian imam and two Catholic bishops to educate the public on the virtue of peace as viewed by each faith to forge “cross-faith understanding.”

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 Chargé d’Affaires and other 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 Chargé spoke with Alarama Abdoul Aziz Amadou, a prominent imam, and Catholic Archbishop Laurent Lompo together at the embassy’s July 4 celebration.

During the month of Ramadan, the embassy hosted an iftar at which Muslims, Christians, and Baha’is joined together to discuss faith and promote peaceful coexistence. Embassy officials said they were pleased to welcome such a broad representation of the community to the iftar to celebrate Islamic values, such as respect for life and diversity, which are values shared by diverse religious groups. Also, during Ramadan, on the embassy website and social media platforms, the Chargé stated, “At its core, Ramadan is a time of deep introspection and spiritual growth as Muslims everywhere reflect on values we all cherish such as compassion, tolerance, and human dignity.” The Chargé met with the Imam of Niamey to express solidarity with the country’s Muslims on Eid al-Fitr and reiterated the U.S. government’s commitment to encouraging peaceful coexistence between people of all faiths.

As has become a yearly tradition, the embassy posted a video on its website wishing the country’s Muslims a blessed holy month of Ramadan and thanking them for their longstanding and robust partnership with the United States. The

embassy also issued op-eds on the eve of the celebration of Eid-al-Fitr and Eid-al-Adha in which the Chargé expressed solidarity with the country's Muslim community.