

# **NIGER 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and worship consistent with public order and national unity. It provides for the separation of state and religion and prohibits religiously affiliated political parties. In July authorities banned full-face veils in the Diffa region under state of emergency provisions. The ban was implemented following an increase in the region in militants' use of burqas or similar coverings to conceal explosives. The government monitored religious expression it viewed as potentially threatening. It organized and attended multiple events on the role of religion in countering violent extremism. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) created a committee tasked with regulating preaching and sermons, assessing religious buildings, evaluating the management of Quranic schools, and determining the relationship between the MOI and the Islamic Council of Niger. Some government officials required imams to submit their sermons for approval before delivering them.

Riots and protests in January targeted Christian churches, other religious buildings, and homes; 10 people were killed, 177 injured, and 69 churches and Christian-owned houses burnt.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, and tolerance with the government. The embassy hosted events and organized outreach activities and exchange programs with religious leaders and civil society to promote religious tolerance and encourage interfaith dialogue, including a roundtable discussion on religious tolerance and several interfaith iftar events.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 18 million (July 2015 estimate). More than 98 percent of the population is Muslim. Approximately 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni and 5 percent are Shia. Roman Catholic and Protestant groups account for less than 2 percent of the population. There are a few thousand Bahais, who reside primarily in Niamey and in communities on the west side of the Niger River. A very small percentage of the population adheres primarily to indigenous religious beliefs. Some individuals adhere to syncretic religious beliefs that combine traditional indigenous practices with Islam.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

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### 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, and worship and the free exercise 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.

Nongovernmental organizations, including religious organizations, must register with the MOI. Registration approval is based on submission of required legal documents, such as the group's charter, and vetting of the organization's leaders. Although some unregistered religious organizations reportedly operate without authorization in remote areas, only registered organizations are legally recognized entities. The MOI requires clerics speaking to a large national gathering either to belong to a registered religious organization or to get a special permit. Nonregistered groups are not legal entities and are not permitted to operate.

Private Quranic schools are unregulated. Public schools are secular.

The constitution specifies the president, the prime minister, and the president of the national assembly must take an oath 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.

### Government Practices

In July authorities banned full-face veils in the Diffa region under state of emergency provisions. The ban was implemented following an increase in the region in militants' use of burkas or similar coverings to conceal explosives.

The MOI in March announced the creation of a committee tasked with regulating preaching and sermons, accounting for religious buildings, evaluating the management of Quranic schools, and determining the relationship between the MOI, which is charged with the direction of religious affairs and the Islamic Council of Niger. The government monitored religious expression it viewed as potentially threatening to public order or national unity. Some government figures,

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including the Governor of Maradi Region, required imams to submit their sermons to the government for approval before delivery.

The Commission for the Organization of the Hajj and Umrah addressed poor organization of the Hajj by local travel agencies and facilitated travel to Saudi Arabia. Some pilgrims reported the commission made the Hajj less burdensome; however, others said they were delayed in their departure to or from Saudi Arabia due to logistical challenges.

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

On January 16-17, violent protesters set churches and other Christian religious buildings on fire in Niamey, Zinder, Maradi, and other towns, killing 10 people, injuring 177, and destroying 69 churches and Christian-owned homes. The press reported the protests were in reaction to President Mahamadou Issoufou stating “We are all Charlie” at an event in Paris commemorating the *Charlie Hebdo* killings.

The Muslim-Christian Interfaith Forum remained active in all regions of the country. The forum promoted cooperation among religious leaders from a range of religious groups, and members of the forum met regularly to discuss community peace and other matters of mutual concern.

It was common for Muslims and Christians to attend one another’s festivities during their respective holidays.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives continued to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance through meetings with Islamic leaders and support of inter- and intrafaith dialogues throughout the country. Embassy officers also met with several traditional chiefs and religious leaders to discuss religious tolerance such as after the attacks in January.

The Ambassador hosted an iftar, which included Muslim, Christian, and Bahai religious leaders, government officials, and members of civil society, where he delivered remarks emphasizing the importance of interfaith tolerance.

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The embassy hosted a *sohour* (Ramadan predawn meal) that included discussions of religious tolerance. The embassy's outreach program during Ramadan sought to promote respect for freedom of religion and encourage interfaith dialogue. Local media covered the events extensively.

The embassy sponsored the construction of a cyber cafe for the Abdou Moumouni University Muslim Students Association, open to all students and intended to facilitate the free exchange of information and tolerant or moderate religious views. The embassy continued to interact on religious tolerance with an interreligious council, composed of Muslim and Christian leaders in the Maradi region. Several of the council members had previously participated in embassy-sponsored exchange programs. The embassy continued to send religious leaders to the United States on these programs, which promote religious tolerance, and to invite U.S. experts to discuss religious tolerance.