

NIGER 2018 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. The government prohibits full-face veils in the Diffa Region under state of emergency provisions to prevent concealment of bombs and weapons. The government also prohibits open-air, public proselytization events due to stated safety concerns. An Islamic Forum, created by the government in 2017 with the stated goal of standardizing the practice of Islam in the country and preventing the use of Islamic institutions to spread Islamic extremism, continued to meet regularly and produced draft legislation for the regulation of religious practice. The government's Commission for the Organization of the Hajj and Umrah came under criticism again when some of the 15,000 sponsored Hajj pilgrims complained of difficulties with high costs, cancelled flights, lost luggage, poor hotels, bad food, and unfair business practices, leaving some travelers unattended in Saudi Arabia.

Representatives of both Muslim and Christian communities reported effective ongoing interactions through a Muslim-Christian forum. Sources from both Muslim and Christian communities agreed, however, that an underlying stress surrounded the forum, with some Muslim leaders expressing discontent about its existence.

The U.S. ambassador and embassy representatives continued to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance through meetings with government leaders. Embassy representatives conveyed messages of religious tolerance when they met with Muslim and Christian representatives and hosted an interfaith iftar during Ramadan. The embassy sponsored programs with religious leaders nationwide focused on countering violent extremism and amplifying moderate religious voices.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 19.9 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the Ministry of Interior (MOI), more than 98 percent of the population is Muslim. Most Muslims are Sunni, with less than 1 percent following the Shia branch of Islam. Roman Catholics, Protestant groups, and other

religious groups account for less than 2 percent of the population. There are several thousand Baha'is, who reside primarily in Niamey and in communities on the west side of the Niger River. A small percentage of the population adheres primarily to indigenous religious beliefs. Some animist practices exist culturally among the Muslim majority, although they have become much 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, and 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.

Nongovernmental organizations, including religious organizations, must register with the MOI. 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. 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 obtain a special permit. Nonregistered groups are not legal entities and are not permitted to operate.

Registered religious groups wishing to obtain permanent legal status must undergo a three-year review and probationary period before the Office of Religious Affairs, which is under the MOI, grants 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 to prevent concealment of bombs and weapons.

The government prohibits open-air, public proselytization events by all religious groups due to expressed safety concerns. There is no legal restriction on private peaceful proselytization or conversion of an individual's personal religious beliefs from one religious faith to another, as long as the group espousing the transition is registered with the government.

The establishment of any private school by a religious association must receive the concurrence of both the MOI and the relevant department of the Ministry of Education (Primary, Secondary, Superior, or Vocational). Private Quranic schools, established uniquely to teach the Quran without providing other education, are unregulated. 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, long-term residency of foreign religious representatives must be approved by the MOI.

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

Government Practices

The government continued its efforts to reduce radicalization or the risk of radicalization through an Islamic Forum, a national forum representing more than 50 organizations, with the stated goal of standardizing the practice of Islam in the country. The Directorate of Religious Affairs, within the MOI, initiated the forum in October 2017. In meetings throughout the year, the forum discussed means to control mosque construction, regulate Quranic instruction, and monitor the content of sermons. With the input of the forum, the MOI drafted a law during the year that would provide a framework for government control of these aspects of religious practice. At year's end, the law remained under ministerial review and, according to the MOI's Directorate of Religious Affairs, was expected to be submitted to the National Assembly for possible passage in 2019.

Government officials expressed concern about funding from Iran, Turkey, and other countries for the construction of mosques and training of imams, but according to observers, the government had only limited resources to track the extent of the funding and fully understand its consequences.

Pilgrims complained, as in past years, about difficulties associated with performing the Hajj. Complaints included high costs, cancelled flights, lost luggage, poor hotels, bad food, and unfair business practices leaving some travelers unattended in Saudi Arabia despite having paid for a package tour. The government's Commission for the Organization of the Hajj and Umrah came under criticism again, as in past years. The commission oversaw Hajj participation of 15,000 pilgrims during the year.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some Muslim representatives continued to express concern that Wahhabism's presence was growing. There was no survey data to indicate how many Wahhabist mosques there were in the country, or to support or refute the impression of growing influence. The majority of the population adhered to the Maliki interpretation of Sunni Islam, but there were separatist branches, and representatives of Islamic associations said some imams preached a version of Islam they stated may have been Wahhabist.

The Muslim-Christian Interfaith Forum continued to meet, bringing together representatives of Islamic associations and Christian churches for regular meetings to discuss interfaith cooperation. 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 the forum. These same representatives of the Interfaith Forum said that the practice of observing each other's religious holidays was decreasing, and that they had a general sense that relations between Christians and Muslims had deteriorated mildly, largely due to social pressure for increased Islamic conservatism.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. ambassador and embassy representatives continued to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance through meetings with government leaders. The ambassador raised religious freedom with the minister of interior and the foreign minister, praising the country's secular constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion, and encouraging broad engagement of Muslim associations in the government's efforts to regulate Quranic schools and Friday sermons.

The ambassador and embassy representatives met with representatives of Muslim and Christian groups to support inter- and intrafaith dialogues to promote education and reduce early marriages throughout the country. U.S. embassy officials hosted an iftar, which included Muslim, Christian, and Baha'i leaders; government officials; and members of civil society. At the event, an embassy official delivered remarks emphasizing the importance of interfaith tolerance.

The embassy sponsored programs with religious leaders nationwide focused on countering violent extremism related to religion and amplifying moderate voices.