

# **BURKINA FASO 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution states the country is a secular state, and both it and other laws provide for the right of individuals to choose and change their religion and to practice the religion of their choice. Religious-based attacks and kidnappings continued in the Sahel Region and increased in the East Region. A number of domestic and transnational terrorist groups operated in the country throughout the year. The government believed individuals associated with these terrorist and extremist groups carried out the majority of religious-based attacks during the year. The government continued to subsidize travel costs for Muslim Hajj pilgrims and allocated subsidies to the four largest religious groups (Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and traditional/animist).

In April individuals affiliated with groups identified by local authorities as terrorist and extremist kidnapped a public schoolteacher in the Sahel Region, based on their stated belief that French is the language of infidels and all education should be conducted in Arabic. In May individuals affiliated with these groups burned down a public schoolhouse and a Muslim teacher's house in the Center-North Region, stating the instruction was not Islamic. In September individuals affiliated with these groups burned and vandalized several schools and teachers' houses in the East Region with a warning against secular teaching during the upcoming school year. Individuals affiliated with these groups kidnapped a Catholic catechist and a Christian pastor in the Sahel Region in May and June, respectively; both were later released without incident. In September individuals affiliated with these groups attacked two separate mosques and killed two imams in the East Region.

In September unidentified individuals vandalized a Catholic church, removing the heads of religious statues in the southwest area of the country. These incidents highlighted what observers and media described as increased targeting of adherents of all religious denominations across the country.

Embassy staff regularly discussed issues affecting religious freedom with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization as well as with religious leaders at the national and local levels to promote religious freedom, interfaith tolerance, and civil dialogue. Embassy staff also discussed the increase in religiously motivated attacks, particularly in the Sahel and East Regions, with the government, including the Ministry of Territorial Administration and

Decentralization, the Ministries of Defense and Security, and the Office of the President. In May the Ambassador hosted an iftar with Muslim youth from the Mali and Niger border regions to promote and discuss religious freedom, and in July the Ambassador hosted religious leaders from a wide spectrum of religious groups in Kaya in the Center-North Region for a wide-ranging discussion. The U.S. embassy regularly promoted religious tolerance, particularly with individuals from the regions of the country more affected by conflict, such as during a forum on good governance for mayors from the Sahel Region in March.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 19.7 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2006 census, 61 percent of the population is Muslim, predominantly Sunni, 19 percent is Roman Catholic, 4 percent belong to various Protestant groups, and 15 percent maintain exclusively indigenous beliefs. Less than 1 percent is atheist or belongs to other religious groups. Statistics on religious affiliation are approximate because Muslims and Christians often adhere simultaneously to some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs.

Muslims reside largely in the northern, eastern, and western border regions, while Christians are concentrated in the center of the country. Indigenous religious beliefs are practiced throughout the country, especially in rural communities. The capital has a mixed Muslim and Christian population. There is no significant correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity, political, or socioeconomic status.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states the country is secular, and both it 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 allows all organizations, religious or otherwise, to register with the Ministry of Territorial Administration, Decentralization, and Internal Security, which is in charge of religious affairs. The ministry, through the Directorate for Customary Affairs and Worship, monitors the implementation of standards for

burial, exhumation, and transfer of remains; helps organize religious pilgrimages; promotes and fosters interreligious dialogue and peace; and develops and implements measures for the erection of places of worship and the registration of religious organizations and religious congregations. Registration confers legal status, and the process usually takes approximately three to four weeks and costs less than 50,000 CFA francs (\$88). Religious organizations are not required to register unless they seek legal recognition by the government, but after they are registered, they must comply with applicable regulations required of all registered organizations or be subject to a fine of 50,000 to 150,000 CFA francs (\$88 to \$260).

Religious groups operate under the same regulatory framework for publishing and broadcasting as other entities. The Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization may request copies of proposed publications and broadcasts to verify they are in accordance with the nature of the religious group as stated in their registration, and it may conduct permit application reviews due to an identified increase in falsified membership lists.

The government generally does not fund religious schools or require them to pay taxes unless they conduct for-profit activities. The government 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 government taxes religious groups only if they engaged in commercial activities, such as farming or dairy production.

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

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

## **Government Practices**

The government allocated 75 million CFA francs (\$132,000) each to the Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and traditional animistic communities. Sources stated that this funding was meant to demonstrate equitable government support to all religious groups in the country. The government also provided funding to registered Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim (commonly referred to as “Franco-Arabic”) schools through subsidies for teacher salaries, which were typically less than those of public school teachers.

In July the government allocated approximately one billion CFA francs (\$1.76 million) to subsidize the costs of 8,100 Muslims for the Hajj. The government continued to routinely approve applications from religious groups for registration, according to religious group leaders.

### **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

A number of domestic and transnational terrorist groups operated in the country throughout the year. These included Ansaroul Islam, Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISIS-GS), Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Al Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, and Al-Mourabitoun.

On September 17, individuals affiliated with groups identified by local authorities as terrorist and extremist killed an imam and six others, including members of his family, during an attack on a mosque in Diabiga, a village approximately 35 miles from Pama in the East Region. On September 25, individuals affiliated with these groups killed the imam in Kompienbiga, a village nine miles from Pama in the East Region.

On April 12, suspected members of the U.S.-designated terrorist organization Islamic State of the Greater Sahara kidnapped a schoolteacher from Bouro primary school in Nassoubou commune in the northern area of the country for teaching in French rather than Arabic. The action followed the 2017 killings of a headmaster, as well as several other teachers and students, by individuals affiliated with groups identified as terrorist and extremist conducting an intimidation campaign to impose Quranic education in place of the secular curriculum and replace French with Arabic. The United Nations reported this intimidation campaign, predominately waged against government-supported public schools, led to the closure of 473 of the 644 primary schools in the North and Sahel Regions by midyear and left 65,000 pupils and 2,000 teachers out of school.

On May 20, individuals affiliated with groups authorities identified as terrorist and extremist kidnapped Catholic catechist Mathieu Sawadogo and his wife Alizeta in Arbinda, located approximately 60 miles from Djibo. Sawadogo and his wife were released several weeks later without incident. The Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, and Protestant and Catholic representatives confirmed their release.

On June 3, individuals affiliated with groups authorities identified as terrorist and extremist kidnapped Pierre Boena, an Assembly of God pastor, in the village of Bilhore, Soum Province, in Sahel Region. Three members of his family – his son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter – were also abducted. According to the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, the pastor and his family were released without harm after four days of captivity.

On May 2, individuals affiliated with groups authorities identified as terrorist and extremist burned down a schoolhouse and teacher housing in the village of Guenbila, near Kaya in the Center-North Region. Sources stated that the individuals carried out the attack as part of an intimidation campaign against secular education in the region. On September 8, individuals affiliated with these groups burned and ransacked three primary schools and teacher housing units in Tankoalou, in the East Region. Sources stated that the individuals carried out the attack as a warning against secular schools opening at the beginning of the school year. This was the first attack against schools in the East Region.

The government, religious leaders, and civil society organizations reported increased vigilance on the part of communities in light of the spate of religious-focused violence and kidnappings during the year. Sources stated that previously, attacks carried out by individuals authorities suspected to be extremists targeted military personnel and civil servants, leaving civilians generally untroubled.

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

On September 16, unknown individuals vandalized a Catholic church, removed the heads from religious statues, and left a message citing Bible verses warning against religious idolatry in the village of Dissin in Ioba Province.

Members of the Burkinabe Muslim Community Organization, the Catholic Archdiocese of Ouagadougou, and the (Protestant) Federation of Evangelical Churches stated that despite the increase in religious-focused attacks, religious tolerance remained widespread, and numerous examples existed 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 National Observatory of Religious Facts, which conducted awareness campaigns and mediation throughout the country. They also worked through nongovernmental organizations such as the Dori-based Fraternal Union of Believers, which encouraged various religious communities, specifically in the Sahel Region, to conduct socioeconomic activities with the goal of fostering religious tolerance. The Catholic Archdiocese of Ouagadougou cited an interfaith Eid al-Adha celebration in August, in which Christian religious leaders participated alongside their Muslim counterparts, in what they stated was an effort to promote religious tolerance in the country.

New Muslim and Protestant congregations opened without approval and oversight from existing Muslim and Protestant federations, continuing a trend from the previous year. Religious leaders stated the Muslim and Protestant federations were often undermined by small new religious groups not falling under their oversight that took positions counter to the federation's messages of tolerance. They said the lack of oversight made it difficult for the official religious groups to monitor and regulate the activities and messages of these new groups.

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

Embassy staff regularly discussed events and policies affecting religious freedom, including the equitable registration process for religious groups, the equitable treatment of religious groups by the government, and the status of the relationship between different religious groups with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization.

The Ambassador and embassy officials met separately with Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant religious leaders throughout the country, at the local and national levels, to encourage their efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and advocate for religious tolerance and freedom.

In March the embassy organized a forum on good governance for all the mayors from the Sahel Region that included a session on countering violent extremism. The session focused on leadership, community development, and the promotion of religious tolerance.

From May 22-24, during Ramadan, the embassy organized and hosted an "Iftar Decouverte" (Ramadan discovery trip) for a group of 50 students ages 13-17 and

17 teachers from Quranic schools in which only traditional Islamic curriculum is taught. The schools were located in the remote villages of the northern regions bordering Mali and Niger. The trip ended with an iftar focused on religious freedom hosted by the Ambassador alongside the Minister of Territorial Administration, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the General Secretary of the National Muslim Federation.

On May 29, embassy representatives visited two Quranic schools located in the villages of Boussouma and Lilboure in the Center-North Region. During the visit, the *marabouts* (traditional Islamic leaders), some of whom also attended the Iftar Decouverte, pointed to the positive impact embassy programs had in promoting civic engagement and religious freedom by countering extremist narratives.

On July 19, the Ambassador invited the Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic leadership of Kaya in the Center-North Region to a breakfast to discuss religious freedom, youth unemployment, and domestic violence among their communities.

On August 14, the Ambassador met with Cheick Boubacar Doukoure, a prominent Fulani religious leader and advocate for peace. Their discussion focused on potential strategies to engage Quranic schools and Muslim leaders in the promotion of religious tolerance.