

# **DJIBOUTI 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but mandates equality for persons of all faiths. The government maintained its authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including assets and personnel of all mosques. Non-Muslim groups register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which conducts lengthy background checks as part of the registration process. The government continued to implement a decree for state control of mosques, and the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs' High Islamic Council closely vetted all Friday prayer service sermons. Unlike in past years, the ministry did not take any disciplinary action against imams deemed extremist. The Ministry of Education for the first time permitted refugees (students and teachers) to miss class to observe their respective religious holidays. Additionally, the ministry launched an initiative to highlight religious tolerance in national civic education. The government granted the request of the country's Christian community to allot plots of land on the outskirts of Djibouti City to build the country's second Christian cemetery.

Norms and customs continued to discourage conversion from Islam. Islamic religious leaders noted traditional social networks often ostracized converts from Islam.

U.S. embassy officials shared the Secretary of State's Ramadan and Eid al-Adha messages on the importance of religious freedom with government and civil society leaders at an embassy-hosted iftar and on social media. U.S. embassy officials met regularly with religious minority leaders to discuss equitable treatment of religious groups by the government.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 884,000 (July 2018 estimate), of which 94 percent is Sunni Muslim. Shia Muslims, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Jews, Baha'is, and atheists constitute the remaining 6 percent. Non-Muslims are generally foreign-born citizens and expatriates, highly concentrated in Djibouti City.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates the registered refugee population at approximately 27,500, of whom 44 percent are

from Somalia, 37 percent from Ethiopia, 16 percent from Yemen and 3 percent from Eritrea. No data exists on the religious affiliations of refugees, but they engage in both Islamic and non-Islamic worship.

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

### **Legal Framework**

Islam is the religion of the state, according to the constitution. The constitution mandates the government respect all faiths and guarantees equality before the law, regardless of one's religion. The law does not impose sanctions on those who do not observe Islamic teachings or who practice other religious beliefs. The constitution prohibits religiously based political parties.

It is illegal for any faith to proselytize in public.

The Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs has authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including mosques, religious events, and private Islamic schools. The Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs and the Ministry of Education jointly oversee the school curricula and teacher certification of approximately 40 Islamic schools. The public school system is secular.

The president swears an Islamic religious oath.

Muslims may bring matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance either to family courts, whose code includes elements of civil and Islamic law, or to civil courts. Civil courts address the same matters for non-Muslims. Citizens are officially considered Muslims if they do not specifically identify with another religious group.

The government requires all foreign and domestic non-Muslim religious groups to register by submitting an application to the Ministry of Interior, which conducts a lengthy background investigation of the group. The investigation reviews group leadership, religious affiliation, sources of finance, and the group's objectives within the country. Ties to extremist religious sects, strong political agendas, and relations with unfriendly foreign nations are factors that would cause a group's application to be rejected. Domestic and foreign Muslim religious groups must inform the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs of their existence and intent to operate and are subject to neither registration nor investigation by the Ministry of Interior. Muslim and non-Muslim foreign religious groups must also gain approval

from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to operate in the country. Once approved, every foreign religious group signs a one-year agreement detailing the scope of its activities. Foreign religious groups must submit quarterly reports to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and renew their agreements every year. The quarterly report details activities, origin of funding for activities, and scope of work completed, and it identifies beneficiaries. Non-Muslim religious groups may not operate in the interim while awaiting registration.

The government is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The government has declared a reservation regarding proselytizing in open public spaces.

### **Government Practices**

The Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs continued its efforts to implement a 2014 decree executing a law on state control of mosques, which converted the status of imams, including refugee imams, to civil service employees of the ministry and transferred ownership of mosque properties and other assets to the government. Government officials reiterated a decree aimed at eliminating political activity from mosques, providing greater government oversight of mosque assets and activities, and countering foreign influence. Although imams were under the direction of the government, mosques' properties continued to be controlled by individual congregations, since the government department designated to manage these assets was not yet operational. The ministry's High Islamic Council sent instructions on and closely vetted all Friday prayer service sermons. The ministry reported no serious incidents of extremist views within mosques. During the year, however, it issued several warnings to imams for polarizing speech. Almost all mosques in the country had an imam who was a civil service employee.

The government continued to permit registered non-Islamic groups, including Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches, to operate freely, according to Christian leaders. No other Christian groups had legal recognition from the government. The government subsidized the cost of utilities at church properties of registered non-Islamic groups, since it considered some church properties to be part of the national patrimony. Religious groups not registered with the government, such as Ethiopian Protestant and non-Sunni Muslim congregations, operated under the auspices of registered groups. Smaller groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is, were not registered with the government but operated privately without incident, according to Christian leaders.

Observers stated these groups and other religious minorities hosted worship gatherings in private housing and usually at night. The groups coordinated loosely with the country's security forces, who impose curfews and noise restrictions.

The government continued to allow non-Islamic religious groups to host events and proselytize on the groups' private property; in practice, groups refrained from proselytizing in public spaces, such as hotels or street corners, due to cultural sensitivities and the threat of government intervention. Government officials noted that any violation of the law forbidding public proselytizing would summon the police. The government continued to permit a limited number of Christian missionaries to sell religious books and pamphlets at a bookstore in Djibouti City.

The government granted the request of the Christian community to allot plots of land on the outskirts of Djibouti City to build a second Christian cemetery. The Christian coalition, composed of Catholic Christians, Protestants, and Ethiopian Orthodox, also requested permission to build an adjoining church, to which the government did not respond.

The government continued to issue visas to foreign Islamic and non-Islamic clergy and missionaries but required they belong to registered religious groups before they could work in the country or operate nongovernmental organizations. Departing from past years' practice, the government required foreign religious leaders to regularize their status by purchasing a residency card for 24,000 Djiboutian francs (\$140).

Local public schools continued to observe only Islamic holidays, but under the direction of the Ministry of Education, schools in refugee camps for the first time permitted students to miss class for their respective religious holidays. The ministry also launched an initiative to highlight religious tolerance in national civic education. Government officials began to implement changes to curriculum that encouraged religious inclusivity.

In May the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs organized logistics for 1,500 individuals to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca. As part of the official mandate, the ministry applied for visas, gathered information for health cards including arranging vaccination appointments, and coordinated with travel agencies to organize food and lodging.

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

Societal norms and customs discouraged conversion from Islam, but conversions reportedly occurred, particularly for marriages with non-Muslim partners. Christian groups reported continued discrimination in employment and education against converts to Christianity who changed their names. Non-Muslims reportedly hid their religious status for increased job options and societal acceptance. Both Muslim and Christian leaders acknowledged conversion from Islam was detrimental to a person's social status; Islamic religious leaders noted traditional social networks often ostracized converts from Islam.

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

Embassy officials met with Ministry of Education and Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs representatives to discuss allowing religious minorities within refugee camps to observe their respective holidays.

The Ambassador hosted three iftars, two in Djibouti City, and one in Dikhil, to highlight religious plurality and religious diversity. The embassy welcomed a U.S. military Muslim chaplain as a special guest to speak on the importance of religious tolerance.

Embassy personnel shared the Secretary of State's Ramadan message on the importance of religious freedom with government, religious, and civil society leaders, including at the Dikhil iftar, and on the embassy's Facebook page.

In October and November surrounding International Religious Freedom Day, the embassy shared a series of stories from survivors of religious persecution on its Facebook page to highlight the importance of religious tolerance.