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Niger

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND LABOR

The Constitution provides for "the right of the free development of each individual in their spiritual, cultural, and religious dimensions," and the Government generally respects the freedom to practice one's religious beliefs, as long as persons respect public order, social peace, and national unity.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

There are generally amicable relations between the various religious communities; however, there were instances when members of the Islamic majority were not tolerant of the rights of members of minority religions to practice their faith. For example, in the November 2000 riots led by Islamic fundamentalists, rioters targeted two Christian missionary sites.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total land area of 489,076 square miles, and its population is approximately 11.2 million. Islam is the dominant religion and is practiced by more than 90 percent of the population. There also are small practicing communities of Christians (including Jehovah's Witnesses) and Baha'i. Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, account for less than 5 percent of the population but are active particularly in the region of Maradi, Dogondoutchi, Niamey, and other urban centers with expatriate populations. As Christianity was the religion of French colonial institutions, its followers include many local believers from the educated, the elite, and colonial families, as well as Africans from neighboring coastal countries, particularly Benin, Togo, and Ghana. Numbering only a few thousand, the Baha'i are located primarily in Niamey and in communities on the west side of the Niger River, bordering Burkina Faso. A small percentage of the population practice traditional indigenous religions. There is no information available regarding the number of atheists in the country.

Active Christian missionary organizations include Southern Baptist, Evangelical Baptist, Catholic, Assemblies of God, Seventh-day Adventist, Serving in Mission (SIM), and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Local/Religion Framework

The Constitution provides for "the right of the free development of each individual in their spiritual, cultural, and religious dimensions," and the Government generally respects the freedom to practice one's religious beliefs, as long as persons respect public order, social peace, and national unity. The Government strives at all levels to protect this right.

No religious group is subsidized, although the Islamic Association has biweekly broadcasts on the government television station. Christian programming generally is broadcast only on special occasions, such as Christmas and Easter.

Religious organizations must register with the Interior Ministry. This registration is a formality, and there is no evidence that the Government favors any religion over another or that it ever has refused to register a religious organization. Approval is based on submission of required legal documents and the vetting of organization leaders. The Government must also authorize construction of any place of worship; however, there were no reports that the Government refused such construction during the period covered by this report.

Foreign missionaries work freely, but their organizations must be registered officially as associations. In addition to proselytizing, most missionary groups generally offer development or humanitarian assistance. The Christian community in Galmi, Tahoua Department, houses a hospital and health center run by SIM missionaries. The hospital and health center have been in operation for more than 40 years.

Christmas, Easter, and Muslim holy days are recognized as national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In reaction to rioting by Islamic fundamentalist groups in November 2000 (see Section III), the Government banned six fundamentalist-oriented organizations. The Government justified the ban on the grounds that these organizations were responsible for "disturbing the peace." In the fall of 2001, the Government banned two additional Islamic organizations because they sent threatening letters to a foreign embassy. Despite the ban, in April 2002, the same organizations issued a tract calling for a jihad in which they denounced the secular state and advocated Shari'a law. The Government reaffirmed the ban and warned those who signed the tract to stop such actions. In June 2002, the Government subsequently arrested the leaders of both organizations and charged them with incitement to revolt. They were released in 2003, but their organizations remained banned at the end of the period covered by this report. No mainstream Islamist organizations or human rights organizations have challenged the legality of the bans.

Starting in 1998, Southern Baptist missionaries in Say (30 miles south of Niamey) faced harassment by members of the majority Islamic community. Upon notifying authorities, the missionaries were told that, while it was within their rights to be there, the local police could not ensure their safety. The problem continued through September 1999, when the missionaries decided to move away. In May 2000, the same Islamic activists in Say threatened to burn down the meeting place of the local Christians who remained. They also threatened to beat or have police arrest a local Christian man in the village of Ouro Sidi who continued to work with the Southern Baptists. There were no reports that such threats ever were carried out during the period covered by this report, and there were no reports of further threats.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

There are generally amicable relations among the various religious communities; however, there have been instances when members of the Islamic majority were not tolerant of the rights of members of minority religions to practice their faith. The local Islamic communities consider the cities of Say, Kiota, Agadez, and Madarounfa holy, and the practice of other religions in those cities is not tolerated as well as in other areas.

In November 2000, several Islamist groups demonstrated in Niamey and Maradi, 400 miles east of the capital, to protest a fashion show being held near Niamey. The demonstrations turned violent, and protesters targeted bars, purported prostitutes, and legal betting kiosks. Also in November 2000, as Maradi police were preparing to meet with Islamic fundamentalists, traditional leaders, and local officials to defuse the situation, mobs led by Islamic fundamentalists attacked the Abundant Life Church and the nearby compound of SIM. The police responded haphazardly, and both facilities suffered extensive damage in the attacks. The police arrested 100 persons in connection with the violence in Maradi and banned six Islamic groups (see Section II). In May 2001, all but 20 persons were released. During 2001 the missionary groups offered to request that the Government drop the charges against the remaining prisoners in return for an admission of responsibility for the attacks; however, the marabout who organized the attacks refused to do so. He and his associates remained in prison for more than 1 year and were granted provisional release on bail in January 2002. During the period covered by this report, the case was closed with no further action taken due to the Government's severe resource constraints.

In March Islamic organizations in Niamey held a rally to protest the war in Iraq and express solidarity with Iraqi citizens. No violence was reported.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The U.S. Embassy regularly emphasizes the importance of tolerance in its public statements and in meetings with government officials and members of civil society.

During the period covered by this report, Embassy officials met with leaders of a wide range of Islamic organizations to hear their perspectives on issues facing the country, such as AIDS, underage marriages, and female genital mutilation, and to foster broader understanding. Embassy officials also met with key Muslim leaders regarding the U.S. military operations in Iraq, in an effort to lessen any potential anti-Christian or anti-Western reactions.

The U.S. Embassy maintains good relationships with minority religious groups, most of which are long-term resident missionaries and well-known members of the American community. Embassy officials also have contact with the Catholic mission, the Baha'i community, and Islamic organizations.

In response to the incidents of November 2000 (see Section III), U.S. Embassy officials immediately met with the missionary victims and senior government, police, and regional military officials in Maradi. The U.S. Ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission traveled to Maradi during the period covered by this report to demonstrate the U.S. Embassy's ongoing attention to religious freedom and tolerance.

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