

NIGER 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The government generally respected religious freedom, but a state governor barred a Muslim cleric from preaching because he belonged to a religious group that had not registered with the government.

There were reports of discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In May unidentified individuals attacked preachers and members of a religious group in the Tahoua region.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government. U.S. embassy officials regularly emphasized the importance of religious tolerance in public statements, in visiting scholar and speaker programs, and in meetings with government officials, religious leaders, and members of civil society.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.9 million (July 2013 estimate). Over 98 percent of the population is Muslim. Approximately 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni and 5 percent are Shia. There are also small groups of Christians and Bahais. Roman Catholic and Protestant groups account for less than 2 percent of the population. The few thousand Bahais reside primarily in Niamey and in communities on the west side of the Niger River. A very small percentage of the population reportedly adheres primarily to indigenous religious beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The constitution provides for the separation of religion and state. The government guarantees the free exercise of religion and expression of beliefs. The law states that each person shall have the right to freedom of thought, opinion, expression, conscience, religion, and belief. The law bans political parties based on religious affiliation.

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Religious organizations must register with the Ministry of the Interior (MOI). Registration approval is based on submission of required legal documents and vetting the organization's leaders. However, some unregistered religious organizations reportedly operated without authorization in remote areas. The MOI requires that clerics either belong to a registered religious organization or get a special permit if speaking to a large national gathering.

The government created the Commission for the Organization of the Hajj and Umrah to address poor organization of the Hajj by local travel agencies. The Commission facilitated travel to Saudi Arabia and reportedly made the Hajj less burdensome for pilgrims.

Government Practices

In April the Tahoua governor's office prevented a cleric it identified as "Wahhabi" from preaching because he did not belong to an organization registered with the MOI.

The government sponsored several events in support of religious tolerance. In November and December the Islamic Council of Niger, at the request of the president, traveled to the country's eight regions to discuss religious tolerance with local communities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

In May local media reported that in the village of Kaoura, Badaguishiri, in the Tahoua region, villagers attacked a group of preachers and members of the Kitab Wa Sunna Islamic association, killing one person and injuring 16. Kitab Wa Sunna leaders reported the incident to the MOI but did not file a legal complaint after local government officials, traditional chiefs, and religious leaders mediated between the parties to restore peace.

In May in Maradi two Muslim groups, the Tijaniya and Izala, clashed over various divergent interpretations of Islamic doctrine. The incident was preceded by the publication of various voice-recordings where one group mocked the other. There were no deaths recorded from the clashes; however, fist-fighting and attacks with

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handheld melee weapons left some injured. Police dispersed the groups but made no arrests. Other Muslim leaders and traditional chiefs mediated between the rival groups and were able to settle the dispute; however, observers said that tensions persisted.

Nongovernmental organizations sponsored events supporting tolerance, non-discrimination, and dialogue. In Diffa the Nigerien Association for the Call for Islamic Solidarity organized a conference on intrafaith dialogue. The event brought together 100 persons from four Muslim groups: Qadriya, Izala, Shia, and Tijaniya.

The Muslim-Christian interfaith forum continued to function in all regions of the country. The forum promoted cooperation among religious leaders from a range of religious groups as members of the forum met regularly to discuss community peace and other matters of mutual concern. Additionally, the forum successfully mediated disputes stemming from perceived religious biases.

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 intra-faith dialogues throughout the country. Embassy officers also met with several traditional chiefs and religious leaders to discuss religious tolerance.

The Ambassador invited over 250 guests to an iftar, including religious leaders from the Nigerien Association for the Call to Islamic Solidarity, the Islamic Association of Niger, and the Islamic Council of Niger, government officials, and members of civil society. The embassy hosted three other iftars and a *sohour* (Ramadan pre-dawn meal) that included discussions on the issue of religious tolerance. The Ramadan outreach program sought to promote respect for freedom of religion and encourage interfaith dialogue. Local media covered the events extensively.

The embassy continued to interact on religious tolerance with an interreligious council that the embassy had partially funded in the past, composed of Muslim and Christian leaders in the Maradi region. The council successfully mediated disputes

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stemming from perceived religious biases. Several of the council members had previously participated in embassy-sponsored exchange programs. The embassy continued to send religious leaders to the U.S. on these programs and invite experts to discuss religious tolerance.