



# U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

## Niger

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

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.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. While the country's religious homogeneity minimizes sectarian tensions, there was one incident of violence between mainstream Sunni Muslims and members of a Wahhabist Sunni group.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 490,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 11.3 million. Islam is the dominant religion and is practiced by more than 90 percent of the population. There also are small communities of Christians and Baha'is. Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, account for less than 5 percent of the population but are present particularly in the regions of Maradi, Dogondoutchi, Niamey, and other urban centers with expatriate populations. Christianity was the religion of French colonial institutions, and 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 practices traditional indigenous religions. There is no information available regarding the number of atheists.

Active Christian missionary organizations include Southern Baptists, evangelical Baptists, Catholics, Assemblies of God, Seventh-day Adventists, Service in Mission (SIM), and Jehovah's Witnesses.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full, and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

No religious group was subsidized; however, the Islamic Association, which acts as an official advisory committee on religious matters to the Government, conducted biweekly broadcasts on the government-controlled television station. Christian programming was broadcast on private and government radio stations, although the government stations would typically broadcast it only on Sundays and 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 construction permits 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 offered development or humanitarian assistance. The Christian community in Galmi, Tahoua region, housed a hospital and health center run by SIM missionaries. The hospital and health center have been in operation for

more than 40 years.

Public school instruction is conducted in French, and there are also public bilingual schools which conduct class in French and Arabic. The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools.

Christmas, Easter Monday, Eid el-Adha, Muharram, the Prophet's birthday, Lailatoul-Quadr, and Eid el-Fitr are recognized as national holidays. It is not uncommon for Muslims and Christians to attend each other's festivities during these holidays.

### **Restrictions on Religious Freedom**

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The two Islamic organizations banned by the Government in 2001 for threatening a foreign embassy and calling for jihad against the secular state remained banned throughout the period covered by this report. No mainstream Islamic organizations or human rights organizations have challenged the legality of the bans.

The Constitution forbids political parties from having a doctrine based on any religious ideology.

The Government does not impose religious speech restrictions as long as there is no intent to disrespect public order, social peace, and national unity. Some senior-level government employees are required to take religious oaths. The Constitution specifies that the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, the President of the National Assembly, and the President of the Constitutional Court must take an oath on a holy book of their own choosing. Members of the Constitutional Court, Independent National Election Commission, and High Council for Communications must do the same. In February, the Government proposed a law to the National Assembly under which judges would be required to take a religious oath. The proposed legislation proved controversial among members of the judiciary, intelligentsia, and civil society. The National Assembly removed the bill from its calendar in May.

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.

### **Abuses by Terrorist Organizations**

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

## **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. However, on March 31, concurrent with popular protests against a new tax, approximately 100 protesters threw stones at, and burned tires in front of, an American missionary church compound in Maradi. No one was killed or injured during the incident. While eyewitnesses reported that the protesters chanted "Allah Akbar," the motives for the attack were not entirely clear. Maradi had experienced turbulence throughout the day due to protests against the new tax. Tire burning and stone throwing occurred in many parts of the city. Police responded quickly, arrested approximately 60 protesters at the compound, and deployed additional officers around it. Missionaries more recently stated that they had not experienced any threatening behavior since March 31, and that they were satisfied with the police response.

In May, groups of mainstream Sunni youths demonstrated in the northern city of Agadez against provocative sermons and other criticisms by members of the Wahhabist Izalay sect. The youths burned a makeshift Izalay mosque. After 3 days of consultations between leaders of both communities hosted by the regional governor, mainstream Sunni leaders agreed to compensate the Izalists for damages to their mosque.

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

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote 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.

As part of its continued outreach to the Muslim community, the Embassy hosted a series of Iftars during Ramadan. The Embassy also sent persons to the U.S. for programs on Islam in America. In July 2004, a Fulbright scholar gave a presentation on Islam and the law in the country. This led to a conference at a local university, at which an Embassy representative spoke on Islamic life in America. In May, an American imam discussed the role of Muslims in the United States during an Embassy-sponsored speaking tour of the country. Embassy officers maintained regular contact with Muslim religious leaders, community

members, and students.

The U.S. Embassy maintains good relationships with evangelical Christian religious groups, most of which are staffed by long-term resident missionaries and well-known members of the American community. Embassy officials also have contact with the Catholic diocese, the Baha'i community, and Islamic organizations. Following the protest in Maradi, Embassy representatives contacted local police to corroborate the report and request additional police protection for the missionary compound. The Embassy followed up with the missionaries on subsequent occasions to ensure their safety.

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