



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [2010 Report on International Religious Freedom](#) » [Africa](#) » [Chad](#)

Chad

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the government continued to monitor the activities of fundamentalist Islamic groups. The government believed this action was necessary to ensure religious tolerance and secularism.

Religious leaders continued to reinforce peaceful links between moderate Muslim and Christian groups as a way to move past the instability of past years.

The government continued to restrict some religious organizations and practices, so they would not infringe on the rights of others, and to safeguard public order and good morale. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There was occasional tension between Christians and Muslims as well as between fundamentalist and moderate Muslims. Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 495,755 square miles and a population of 11 million.

More than half of the population is Muslim, approximately one-third is Christian, and the remainder follows indigenous religious beliefs or has no religion. Most northerners practice Islam, and most southerners practice Christianity or indigenous religions. Population patterns are becoming more complex, especially in urban areas, and there has been a proliferation of mosques in the traditionally Christian south.

The majority of Muslims adhere to the Sufi Tijaniyah tradition. A minority of Muslims (5 to 10 percent) hold more fundamentalist beliefs, which, in some cases, are associated with Wahhabism or Salafism.

Roman Catholics represent the largest Christian group. Most Protestants affiliate with various evangelical Christian groups. Small Baha'i and Jehovah's Witnesses communities also are present.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the government bans certain Muslim groups and indirectly monitors Islamic activities through the High Council for Islamic Affairs (HCIA), an independent religious organization.

The constitution provides that the country shall be a secular state; however, some policies favor Islam in practice.

A committee composed of members of the HCIA and the Directorate of Religious and Traditional Affairs in the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) organized trips to Mecca for the Hajj (pilgrimage during Dhu'l-Hijjah, the 12th month of the Islamic calendar) and Umrah (pilgrimage).

While the government is legally obligated to treat all religious groups or denominations equally, some non-Muslims alleged that Muslims received preferential status, particularly concerning use of public lands for building places of worship.

The director of religious and traditional affairs oversees religious matters. Working under the minister of the interior, the director is responsible for arbitrating intercommunal conflicts, reporting on religious practices, and ensuring religious freedom. The HCIA oversees Islamic religious activities, including the supervision of some Arabic language schools and higher institutions of learning and the representation of the country in international Islamic meetings.

The HCIA, in coordination with the president, appoints the grand imam, a spiritual leader for Muslims, who oversees each region's high imam and serves as head of the council. In principle although not consistently in practice, the grand imam has the authority to restrict proselytizing by Islamic groups, regulate the content of mosque sermons, and exert control over activities of Islamic charities.

Religious leaders are involved in managing the country's wealth. A representative of the religious community sits on the Revenue Management College, the body that oversees use of oil revenues. The seat rotates between Muslim and Christian leaders every four years. At the end of the reporting period, a Muslim religious leader held the seat.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Easter Monday, Eid al-Fitr, All Saints' Day, Eid al-Adha, and Christmas. It is common for Muslims and Christians to attend each other's festivities.

The government required religious groups, except indigenous groups, but including foreign missionary groups, to register with the MOI. Registration took place without discrimination and the government interpreted this recognition as official. Despite popular perceptions to the contrary, registration does not confer tax preferences or other benefits on religious groups.

The government prohibits activity that "does not create conditions of cohabitation among the populations," in order to regulate groups who advocated actions that would heighten sectarian tensions.

The government prohibited religious instruction in public schools but permitted all religious groups to operate private schools without restriction. Many Arabic language, Islamic culture schools were financed by foreign donors, including the governments of Egypt and Libya, and other governments; nongovernmental organizations; and individuals, particularly in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, and Kuwait.

The government closed certain Qur'anic schools that compelled children to beg for food and money. The government was collaborating with the HCIA and the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization on building two large Qur'anic schools in Karal and Koundoul to replace those that closed.

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While most interfaith dialogue took place on a private, voluntary basis, the government was generally supportive of these initiatives.

Government officials, including the president, regularly acknowledged the value of harmonious relations among religious groups and celebrated the country's religious diversity.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

During the reporting period, the government maintained the ban imposed almost six years ago on Al-Mountada Al-Islami, the World Association for Muslim Youth, the Mecca Al-Moukarrama Charitable Foundation, and Al-Haramain Charitable Foundation, for promoting violence to further religious goals. The ban was not necessarily enforced, and evidence indicated that these organizations continued to operate. For example, for an iftar celebration during Ramadan in 2009, the World Association for Muslim Youth publicly hosted a dinner at a local hotel without causing any government reaction. This organization also maintained a publicly advertized office and continued to work with well-known individuals in both the governmental and private sectors.

The government also banned Al Faid al-Djaria (also spelled Al Faydal Djaria), a Sufi group in the Kanem, Lake Chad, and Chari Baguirmi areas. The director of religious and traditional affairs, the HCIA, and certain Ulama (Muslim religious authorities) objected to some of Al Faid al-Djaria's customs, such as the incorporation of singing, dancing, and the intermixing of sexes during religious ceremonies, which they deem un-Islamic. However, the group carried out activities in the Chari Baguirmi region.

The government reportedly monitored some organizations, such as Ansar al-Sunna, which adhered to a more austere interpretation of Islam and received significant foreign funding.

The 2007 ban on all forms of street corner evangelism and preaching remained in effect; however, local organizations could apply for government permission to engage in such activities, and the government usually granted such permission.

During the reporting period, a conflict of authority erupted between the HCIA, headed by the grand imam, and the Union of Mosque Imams (UMI), a Wahhabist group expressing dissatisfaction with the tolerant and ecumenical approach of the HCIA.

On February 2, 2010, the grand imam asked the MOI to suspend the authority of the UMI to operate, on grounds that the body was conducting "irregular and secret activities under foreign influence." According to a letter that the grand imam sent to the MOI, members of the UMI supported religious and political goals that departed from the Sufi tradition of tolerance. The UMI, he charged, aimed to draw local mosques and their followers away from the HCIA and "exploit" them for foreign-controlled purposes. President Deby then ordered the UMI to suspend operations as a way of preserving unity among Muslims, an edict that the group appeared to respect.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The government continued to detain Sheikh Ahmet Ismael Bichara following a 2008 confrontation in Kuono between security forces and Bichara's supporters that left 72 persons dead. Unconfirmed information indicated that police might have transferred Bichara to Koro Toro prison, where those with rebel sympathies are in some cases detained. The

government regarded the detention as justified under its prohibition of activity that "does not create conditions of cohabitation among the populations."

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There was occasional tension between Christians and Muslims as well as between fundamentalist and moderate Muslims. Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom during the reporting period.

Religious groups met regularly to try to resolve sources of tension and promote greater collaboration. During these encounters leaders discussed issues of peaceful cohabitation, tolerance, and respect for religious freedom. On January 1, 2010, a one-day ecumenical prayer gathering of Muslims and Christians took place at the main stadium in N'Djamena where attendees prayed for peace and unity. During the celebration key religious leaders, including the grand imam and the Catholic archbishop, made statements calling on the government and believers to support peace and unity. According to the grand imam, "Peace will result from the efforts of all Chadians whose actions promote mutual respect, cohabitation, and charity between communities regardless of religion, ethnicity, culture, tradition, or custom." The archbishop stressed that "Words are not sufficient to build peace and unity, communities must work together."

There continued to be reports of tension within the Muslim community between leaders of the HCIA and more fundamentalist groups regarding interpretations of practices, preaching, and the leading of prayers.

On November 13, 2009, there was a conflict over an interpretation of the Qur'an in the eastern town of Abeche between Tijaniyah and Wahhabist groups. Police arrested two imams and forcibly relocated them to different regions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The embassy continued a wide variety of outreach programs with the grand imam, HCIA, and Catholic and Protestant leaders to promote tolerance and mutual understanding. For example, on April 6, 2010, an embassy team visited an Islamic center in the southern region of Moyen Chari. The team discussed human rights issues and practices of tolerance with the imam of the center.

[Back to Top](#)