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Djibouti

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were occasional reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Familial and societal customs discouraged proselytizing and conversion from Islam.

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 8,450 square miles and a population of 800,000. More than 99 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. There are a small number of Roman Catholics, Protestants, Copts, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, and Baha'is. Foreign-born citizens, as well as many expatriate residents, are often members of these denominations. Citizens are officially considered Muslims if they do not specifically identify with another faith.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

Although Islam is the state religion, the government imposed no sanctions on those who choose to ignore Islamic teachings or to practice other faiths.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has authority in all Islamic matters, including mosques, private religious schools (with the Ministry of Education), religious events, as well as general Islamic guidelines of the state. The High Islamic Council within

the ministry has the mandate to give advice on all religious concerns. It also is responsible for coordinating all Islamic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the country.

The president and other government employees, including magistrates, are required to take religious oaths. While there is no penalty established by law for noncompliance, it remains an official custom. A small number of non-Muslims hold civil service positions without discrimination.

For matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, Muslims are directed to family courts whose code includes elements of civil law and Shari'a (Islamic law). Civil courts address the same matters for non-Muslims.

The government allows civil marriage only for non-Muslim foreign residents. Muslims are required to marry in a religious ceremony. A non-Muslim man may marry a Muslim woman only after converting to Islam. According to the family code, "impediment to a marriage occurs when a Muslim woman marries a non-Muslim."

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, the Ascension of the Prophet, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and the Islamic New Year.

The government requires that a religious group register by submitting an application to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which, along with the Ministry of the Interior, investigates the group. Once approved, the group signs an initial two-year bilateral agreement detailing the scope of the group's activities.

Foreign clergy and missionaries performed charitable works and sold religious books. The government licensed foreign missionary groups to operate schools. Public schools did not teach religion.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Societal norms and customs discouraged proselytizing by non-Muslims and conversion from Islam; non-Muslim religious groups generally did not engage in public proselytizing.

The relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some representatives of Christian denominations noted occasional incidents of societal animosity towards non-Muslims. As in previous periods, there were isolated reports of schoolchildren throwing rocks at churches. However, the presence of French Roman Catholics and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, part of society for almost a century, were examples of tolerance of other faiths by the Muslim majority.

Ethnic Somalis who were Christian were in some cases buried according to Islamic traditions by relatives who did not recognize their non-Muslim faith.

Several different Christian denominations maintained close informal ties to each other. The Minister of Islamic Affairs met with the heads of other religious groups occasionally, including at government-organized ceremonies.

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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.

Embassy representatives periodically met with leaders and members of religious communities and with U.S. NGOs with a faith-based component to promote respect for religious diversity.

During the reporting period, the embassy undertook initiatives to increase and improve Muslim outreach, while repeating successful programs from past years. In both cases the embassy endeavored to cultivate relationships with the Muslim religious hierarchy while undergirding these ties with programs and projects that address development needs of the greater community.

In November 2009 the ambassador hosted meetings with senior officials of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, parliamentarians, and civil society leaders to exchange views on themes expressed by President Obama in Cairo in June 2009. In addition the embassy undertook a number of other initiatives that addressed Muslim leaders.

A U.S. Air Force Muslim chaplain visited Djibouti during the reporting period and met with senior officials at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, local imams, and the Roman Catholic bishop of Djibouti. The chaplain also visited a madrassah high school.

Embassy officials continued to engage frequently on Horn of Africa peace and security issues with the Ministry for Islamic Affairs, which plays a leading role in government policy on Somalia.

The embassy also focused several of its English-language discussion groups on religious freedom and pluralism.

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