

# **DJIBOUTI 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected the religious freedom of individual citizens and foreign residents. The government's respect for religious freedom declined with the passage of a law granting the Ministry of Religious Affairs increased oversight of mosques, including of messages disseminated during Friday prayers.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government and religious leaders. The embassy also supported the U.S. special envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) during the OIC ministerial meeting in November. The Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation assisted with renovation of the historic Korjib Mosque in Tadjourah.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The 2010 UN World Population Prospects estimates the population at 889,000, of which 94 percent is Sunni Muslim. There are small numbers of Roman Catholics, Protestants, Copts, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, and Bahais, who are generally foreign-born citizens and expatriates. Citizens are officially considered Muslims if they do not specifically identify with another religious group.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and most other laws and policies protect religious freedom. However, an October law grants the Ministry of Religious Affairs increased oversight of Djibouti's mosques, including of messages disseminated during Friday prayers.

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Although the constitution states that Islam is the state religion, the law does not impose sanctions on those who do not observe Islamic teachings or practice other religious beliefs. The constitution does not specifically prohibit proselytizing.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs has authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including mosques, private religious schools (together with the education ministry), and religious events. The ministry's High Islamic Council has a mandate to give advice on all Muslim concerns. The council also is responsible for coordinating all Islamic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the country. The foreign ministry coordinates the activities of non-Islamic NGOs.

There are approximately 40 private Islamic schools. The public school system is secular. Public schools do not teach religion.

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.

Muslims resolve matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance in family courts whose code includes elements of civil law and Islamic law. Civil courts address the same matters for non-Muslims.

The government allows civil marriage only for non-Muslim citizens and foreign residents. Muslims must marry in a religious ceremony.

The government requires that a religious group register by submitting an application to the Interior Ministry, which investigates the group. Foreign religious groups have the added step of gaining approval from the Foreign Ministry. Once approved, the group signs a two-year agreement detailing the scope of the group's activities. The approval process is lengthy due to required background investigations and the government's limited administrative capacity.

The government permits Muslim foreign clergy and missionaries, as well as a small number of Somali Christian missionaries, to perform charitable works and sell religious books. The government permits Western non-Muslim missionaries to enter the country on tourist visas and to operate NGOs. The government licenses foreign missionary groups to operate orphanages.

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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.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom, but a new law allowed the government to impose restrictions on the topics used in sermons in mosques. The authorities briefly detained two imams for questioning related to sermon topics, and replaced an imam from the Al-Ahbash group with one selected by the High Islamic Council.

In September the security services reportedly detained an imam, questioned him about the political content of his sermons, and released him after a few hours without charges.

In October parliament gave management oversight of mosque assets to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and charged the ministry with selecting weekly themes for Friday prayers with the goal of eliminating political activity from mosques.

In October the High Islamic Council issued a fatwa calling for a boycott of the small Al-Ahbash group, whose members were mainly Ethiopian immigrants. The fatwa criticized the group's beliefs as a "deviation" from Islam. Following the fatwa, the High Islamic Council assigned a new imam to the Al-Ahbash mosque and closed its madrassah. Al-Ahbash members were free to worship privately in their homes and did not face additional discrimination as a result of their association with the group.

A small number of non-Muslims held civil service positions.

The religious affairs minister met with the heads of other religious groups occasionally, including at government-organized ceremonies.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Societal norms and customs discouraged conversion from Islam, although conversions did occur. Western religious groups were

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present under the auspices of running charitable NGOs and did not engage in public proselytizing.

The relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some representatives of Christian denominations noted rare incidents of individual animosity towards non-Muslims. The presence of French Roman Catholics and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, part of society for almost a century, exemplified the Muslim majority's religious tolerance.

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

The ambassador met with representatives of the High Islamic Council to discuss religious freedom, freedom of speech, and related human rights concerns following the September attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi, Libya and subsequent protests around the world. The embassy also supported the visit of the U.S. special envoy to the OIC during the November OIC ministerial meeting. While in Djibouti, the special envoy communicated the importance of religious freedom and freedom of expression in the United States during bilateral meetings and in his remarks to representatives from OIC member states. The Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation assisted with renovation of the historic Korojib Mosque in Tadjourah.