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## Mali

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

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 474,764 square miles and a population of 14.5 million.

Muslims constitute an estimated 90 percent of the population. Nearly all Muslims are Sunni. Most of these are Sufi; however, a sizeable minority rejects Sufi traditions and refers to themselves as Sunnite or Ahl-al Sunna. The population is 1 percent Christian of which approximately two-thirds are Catholic and one-third Protestant. The remaining 9 percent practice indigenous religious beliefs or practice no religion. The majority of citizens practice their religion daily. Groups that practice indigenous religious beliefs reside throughout the country, but are most active in rural areas.

There are several mosques associated with the fundamentalist group Dawa al Tabligh; however, their influence appeared to have declined in recent years. Although Dawa al Tabligh hosted annual conferences for its adherents, the 2009 conference in Kidal was only lightly attended.

#### 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.

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and allows for religious practices that do not pose a threat to social stability and peace.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Mawloud, the Prophet's Baptism, Easter Monday, Eid al-Fitr (Ramadan), Tabaski (Eid al-Adha), and Christmas.

The minister of territorial administration and local collectivities may prohibit religious publications that defame another religion; however, there were no reports of such prohibitions during the reporting period.

The government required the registration of all public associations, including religious associations; however, registration conferred no tax preference or other legal benefits, and failure to register was not penalized in practice. The registration process was routine and not burdensome. The government did not require indigenous religious groups to register.

The Malian High Council of Islam (HCIM) is an umbrella organization with representatives from all significant Islamic organizations in the country. It served as the main liaison between the government and hundreds of these groups. The government frequently consulted with the HCIM on social issues of national interest. Prior to making important decisions on potentially controversial national issues, the government also consults with a "Committee of Wise Men" that included the Catholic archbishop and Protestant and Muslim leaders.

The government is secular. Public schools do not offer religious instruction. A number of private, parochial, and other religious institutions, both Muslim and Christian, exist, and parents faced no legal restrictions on enrollment of their children in these schools.

Religious identity was not designated on passports or national identity documents. For national identity documents, the law required a photograph, which clearly shows the entire face, including hair and the two ears. Citizens may not wear religious headdress in official photos for identity documents if the headdress obstructs any part of the face.

#### 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.

#### Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

There was one unconfirmed report of coerced religious conversion by the terrorist organization Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). On November 29, 2009, Alicia Gomez, a Spanish aid worker, was abducted in Mauritania and held as a hostage in Malian territory by elements of AQIM. She was released on March 10, 2010. According to an AQIM communiqué, she was released for humanitarian reasons and because, reportedly, she had converted to Islam during her captivity.

#### 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. The country has strong traditions of tolerance and openness that extended to religious practices and beliefs. Adherents of different

religious groups were often part of the same family. Followers of one religion attended religious ceremonies of other religious groups, especially baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

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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 officials expanded dialogue with Muslim groups to promote religious freedom, mutual understanding, and the continued secularism of the government. The embassy maintained contact with the foreign missionary community and worked with government officials and societal leaders to promote religious freedom, including through the cosponsorship of an interfaith dialogue hosted by a local imam.

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