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Niger

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. However, the minister of religious affairs attempted to ban religious speech that he considered threatening to public order.

There was one report of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. 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 490,000 square miles and a population of 15.9 million.

More than 98 percent of the population practices Islam. Approximately 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni and 5 percent are Shi'a. There are also small communities of Christians and Baha'is. Christians, both Roman Catholics and Protestants, account for less than 2 percent of the population and are mainly in the regions of Maradi, Dogondoutchi, and Niamey, as well as other urban centers with foreign resident populations. Adherents of Christianity include local believers from descendants of French colonial families as well as immigrants from neighboring coastal countries, particularly Benin, Togo, and Ghana. Numbering a few thousand, Baha'is reside primarily in Niamey and in communities on the west side of the Niger River bordering Burkina Faso. A very small percentage of the population is reported to practice indigenous religious beliefs.

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 government generally respected this right in practice, but monitors religious expression it views as potentially threatening to public order or national unity.

Traditional chiefs and senior Muslim clergy asserted a right to approve sermon content and mosque building plans by foreign Muslim preachers and donors; however, in practice this assertion did not appear to impede foreign clergy and organizations, whose doctrine often differs from the traditional Sufi teachings of mainline clergy and chiefs.

Following the February 18, 2010, seizure of power by the military, the new military junta, the Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy, dismantled the Ministry of Religious Affairs and gave responsibility for overseeing religious affairs to the newly expanded Ministry of the Interior, Security, Decentralization, and Religious Affairs. The Niger Islamic Council (CIN), which was established in 2006 and composed of representatives from Muslim organizations and government agencies, reports to the Ministry of the Interior (MOI).

The government regulated Hajj preparations, citing flawed organization of the Hajj by various local travel agencies in the past.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Maulid al-Nabi (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), Easter Monday, Eid al-Fitr, Lailat al-Qadr, Eid el-Adha, Muharram, and Christmas. It is common for Muslims and Christians to attend one another's festivities during these holidays.

The constitution forbids political parties from having a platform based on any religious ideology.

Religious organizations must register with the MOI. Registration is a formality, and there is no evidence that the government favors one religious group over another, or that it ever 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 reporting period.

Foreign missionaries must be officially registered as associations.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public schools.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. However, the minister of religious affairs attempted to ban religious speech that he considered threatening to public order.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

During the previous reporting period, the CIN organized seminars to harmonize Islamic holy days in order to avoid a repeat of the 2007 incidents when police harassed or detained local leaders for celebrating Eid al-Fitr two days later than the government's announced Eid date.

On November 26, 2009, officials of the former Ministry of Religious Affairs and some religious leaders issued strong warnings to dissuade all those who wanted to celebrate Eid al-Adha on November 27, that is, one day earlier than the date determined by the government. On September 21, 2009, Zinder regional police used tear gas and batons to disperse the population of Korin Bakoye for celebrating Eid al-Fitr one day later than the government's announced Eid date.

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 was one report of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

In February 2009 the Catholic Church in Niamey conducted an evaluation of its programs to promote interfaith sensitivity and dialogue. Evaluators recommended continued dissemination of positive values shared by Christians and Muslims, and called on religious leaders to continue educating people to avoid behavior and language likely to sow discord.

Christian and Muslim leaders continued to cultivate these values in their efforts to foster a peaceful resolution to the February 2010 seizure of power by the military. A workshop in April and May 2010 held by the Association Nationale pour l'Appel et la Solidarite Islamique in each of the country's eight regions provided an opportunity for interfaith dialogue.

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 regularly emphasized the importance of religious tolerance in public statements, programs, and in meetings with government officials and members of civil society. Secretary General of the Federation of Islamic Associations of Niger Sheikh Mahamane participated in an International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) visit to the United States for two weeks in 2008. In April 2010 he was the featured speaker in a USAID tour of the eight regional capitals in the country, speaking about religious tolerance in the United States.

Chaibou Mahamane Dambo, of Islamic-oriented Radio and TV Bonferey, the largest and most influential religious broadcaster in the country, gave heavy rotation on radio and television to President Obama's Ramadan message.

Sheikh Boureima Abdou, one of the most influential Islamic figures in the country, attended an IVLP from October 24 to November 14, 2009. Upon his return he partnered with the embassy to hold a seminar in March 2010 that reached millions through coverage on national television, radio, and newspapers. He explained that he left with his colleagues under the impression that the United States is an "enemy of Islam" but returned impressed by the diversity, tolerance, openness, and faithfulness of the American people.

The embassy widely distributed copies of President Obama's key speeches in Cairo and Ghana, and copies of his Ramadan greeting to influential Islamic leaders, contacts, the media, and the public.

In conjunction with a group consisting of the most revered musicians in the country, the embassy produced a song and music video based on President Obama's speeches in Cairo and Ghana. The musicians, from every region of the country, sang and rapped in French and local languages about the importance of religious tolerance and good governance.

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