



Niger

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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Although the Minister of Religious Affairs attempted to ban religious speech he considered threatening to public order, the Government generally respected religious freedom in practice.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and 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 15.4 million. Islam is practiced by more than 98 percent of the population. 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 fewer than 2 percent of the population and are present mainly in the regions of Maradi and Dogondoutchi, and in Niamey and other urban centers with expatriate populations. Adherents of Christianity include local believers from 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 small percentage of the population practices 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 law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Government generally respected this right in practice, although it 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 differed from the traditional Sufi teachings of mainline clergy and chiefs.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA), created in March 2007, promotes interfaith dialogue and elicits religious viewpoints on government policies and programs. The Niger Islamic Council (CIN), established in February 2006 and composed of representatives from Muslim organizations and government agencies, reports to the MRA.

In November 2007 the Government decided to regulate Hajj preparations, citing flawed organization of the Hajj by various local travel agencies.

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 not uncommon for Muslims and Christians to attend each other'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 Ministry of the Interior. 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 registered officially as associations.

The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Although the Minister of Religious Affairs attempted to ban religious speech he considered threatening to public order, the Government generally respected religious freedom in practice.

On March 17, 2009, the Minister of Religious Affairs issued a statement on national radio and television banning "parallel preaching"--preaching in mosques occurring at the same time as authorized imams' sermons--and preaching in markets or other "inappropriate locations." Although citing the value of religious freedom, the Minister also banned radio and television broadcasts of religious sermons or discussions likely to generate contention, threaten public order, or undermine the cohesion of the country's Muslim community. However, the practice of parallel preaching continued, and there were no reports that the Government attempted to enforce the Minister's proclamations.

On March 11, 2009, the CIN expressed an intent to regulate religious sermons by requiring the CIN's prior approval of any preaching sessions.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The CIN organized seminars to harmonize Islamic holy days and avoided a repeat of the October 2007 incidents when police harassed or detained local leaders for celebrating Eid al-Fitr two days 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, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

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, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

On March 3, 2009, in Niamey two Muslim sects--Ahli Sunna and Kala Kato--engaged in a heated confrontation over interpretation of Islamic doctrine. The police dispersed the crowd and briefly detained several protagonists.

On February 24, 2009, the Catholic Church in Niamey conducted an evaluation of its training that promoted 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.

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 its public statements, in its visiting scholar and speaker programs, and in meetings with government officials and members of civil society.