



## Niger

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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 period covered by this report. However, in a few instances local authorities interrupted celebrations of Eid al-Fitr that were on different days than the Government's officially declared end of fasting.

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 14.8 million. Islam is practiced by more than 90 percent of the population. Approximately 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni and 5 percent Shi'a. There are also small communities of Christians and Baha'is. Christians, both Roman Catholics and Protestants, account for less than 5 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 the educated, the elite, and 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 traditional indigenous religious beliefs.

#### Section II. Status of 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 respects 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 assert a right to approve sermon content and mosque building plans by foreign Muslim preachers and donors. However, in practice this assertion did not seem to impede foreign clergy and organizations, whose doctrine often differed from the traditional Sufi teachings of mainline clergy and chiefs.

Religious organizations must register with the Interior Ministry. Registration is a formality, and there is no evidence that the Government favors one religious group over another or that it ever has 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 period covered by this report. Foreign missionaries must be registered officially as associations.

The Constitution forbids political parties from having a doctrine based on any religious ideology.

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, 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 Christmas, Easter Monday, Eid el-Adha, Muharram, Maulid al-Nabi (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), Lailat al-Qadr, and Eid al-Fitr as national holidays. It is not uncommon for Muslims and Christians to attend each other's festivities during these holidays.

#### *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 period covered by this report.

#### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

On October 13, 2007, local police in the town of Korin Bakoye in the Zinder region dispersed a crowd for celebrating Eid al-Fitr 2 days later than the Government's announced Eid date. The police briefly detained the local imam and a few other persons while the village chief and most of the other residents fled. Also on October 13, 2007, the traditional chief in Korgom, in the Maradi region, dismissed the local imam for asking the population to ignore the Government's announcement and to continue fasting until October 12.

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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### *Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom*

The MRA fostered interfaith understanding through several high-profile forums.

On March 28, 2008, at the opening of a national preaching symposium held by an Islamic association, the Minister of Religious Affairs reminded the audience that the proliferation of religious associations allowed by the Constitution should not lead to religious sectarianism. He stressed the responsibility of religious leaders to promote peace in the country.

On August 29, 2007, at the opening of the first session of the Niger Islamic Council, the Minister of Religious Affairs called on Islamic leaders to "create the conditions of peaceful coexistence between Muslims, Christians, and members of other beliefs."

### **Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

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 April 3-5, 2008, the Catholic Church in Konni, Madaoua, Tahoua, and Dogondoutchi held training sessions to promote interfaith sensitivity and dialogue among Christian and Muslim officials working within the Catholic Church's social services. Similar sessions were held in Niamey on April 16-18, 2008.

#### **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 and in meetings with government officials and members of civil society.

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