

NIGER 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. The government took measures to protect religious minorities and to restore calm during violent protests in Zinder in September.

There were reports of discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, but prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government. U.S. embassy officials regularly emphasized the importance of religious tolerance in public statements, in visiting scholar and speaker programs, and in meetings with government officials, religious leaders, and members of civil society.

Section I. Religious Demography

The UN World Population Prospects estimates the population to be 16.6 million. Over 98 percent considers itself Muslim. Approximately 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni and 5 percent are Shia. There are also small groups of Christians and Bahais. Roman Catholic and Protestant groups account for less than 2 percent of the population. The few thousand Bahais reside primarily in Niamey and in communities on the west side of the Niger River. A very small percentage of the population reportedly adheres primarily to indigenous religious beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution provides for the separation of religion and state. The state guarantees the free exercise of religion and expression of beliefs. The law states that each person shall have the right to freedom of thought, opinion, expression, conscience, religion, and belief. The law bans political parties based on ethnic, regional, or religious affiliation.

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On November 7, the National Assembly indefinitely postponed consideration of a government bill to support girls' education and protection, calling for further review and "consultation with all concerned parties." Islamic groups had criticized a provision of the bill enabling the government to prohibit a marriage that would deny a girl the right to continue her education.

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 al-Adha (Tabaski), Muharram, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, but prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom. In general, societal respect for religious freedom was characterized by strong support for events sponsored by both governmental and nongovernmental organizations supporting tolerance, non-discrimination, and dialogue.

On September 14, public disturbances took place in Zinder in response to an anti-Islamic film. Local youth staged a peaceful march through the city in the morning. In the afternoon, some participants at a meeting advocated violence. Scores of people marched to the sultan's palace and then to the governor's office to express displeasure over the film, but no officials responded. In reaction, an angry mob moved to the Catholic mission in the city center, where protesters broke through the front gate and damaged the church. Other protesters burned tires in the church's vicinity while owners of nearby stores and stalls opposed them. Rioters subsequently attacked and caused minor damage to another church and the house of a Christian religious leader. It took police two hours to regain control using teargas. Police detained about 50 people, mostly minors. Local government officials, traditional chiefs, and Islamic leaders visited the Christian leaders to offer their sympathies and assure them that they wanted the situation addressed.

The Muslim-Christian interfaith forum continued to function in all regions of the country.

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It was common for Muslims and Christians to attend one another's festivities during their respective holidays.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador and embassy representatives continued to support religious freedom and tolerance through meetings with Islamic leaders. The embassy held a press conference in September highlighting the U.S. government's work to promote religious tolerance and discredit negative messages. The embassy organized three conferences on "Peace, Tolerance, and Solidarity" in various regions, featuring a film on the practice of Islam in the United States, a panel of speakers including an alumnus from a U.S.-sponsored exchange program, and an open session for questions and comments.

The embassy also hosted three iftars that included exchanges on religious tolerance and sent Nigeriens to the United States on a religious tolerance program for international visitors. Embassy officials met with several traditional chiefs and religious leaders to discuss religious tolerance.

The embassy continued to fund an interreligious council composed of Muslim and Christian leaders in the Maradi region. The council has successfully mediated disputes stemming from perceived religious biases. Embassy personnel met periodically with the council to discuss religious tolerance and other issues facing the region.