



Djibouti

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however proselytizing was discouraged.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 8,450 square miles and a population of 700,000. More than 99 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. There are a small number of Roman Catholics, Protestants, Copts, and Baha'is, accounting for less than 1 percent of the population. There are no known practitioners of traditional indigenous religions. Citizens officially are considered Muslims if they do not specifically identify with a faith; there are no figures available on the number of atheists in the country. Foreign-born Djiboutians are generally members of Roman Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, or Ethiopian Orthodox denominations.

A small number of foreign missionary groups operate in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, proselytizing is discouraged. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

Although Islam is the state religion, the Government imposes no sanctions on those who choose to ignore Islamic teachings or to practice other faiths. The Government maintains diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

The Shari'a Court has been replaced by the Family Court. This court applies the Family Code, which includes elements of civil and Shari'a law, to rule on matters related to the family such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. These courts are applicable to Muslims only; non-Muslims are directed toward civil courts.

The Government requires that religious groups register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by submitting an application to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which, along with the Ministry of Interior, investigates the group. Once approved, the group signs an initial two-year bilateral agreement detailing the scope of the group's activities. Baha'i members reported no incidents of discrimination but did not confirm whether the organization submitted a request for registration during the period covered by this report. In previous years, such requests have been refused.

Foreign clergy and missionaries are permitted to perform charitable works and to sell religious books. These groups, which focus on humanitarian services in the education and health sectors, reportedly faced no harassment during the period covered by this report. Foreign missionary groups are licensed by the Government to operate schools. Religion is not

taught in public schools.

The country observes the Muslim holy days of Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, the Islamic New Year, and the Ascension of the Prophet as national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

There is no legal prohibition against proselytizing; however, proselytizing is discouraged for non-Muslims.

Family Court is not applicable to non-Muslims, the latter are brought to civil courts. Civil marriage is permitted only for non-Muslim foreigners. Muslims are required to marry in a religious ceremony, and a non-Muslim man may marry a Muslim woman only after converting to Islam. According to article 23 of the Family Code, "impediment to a marriage occurs when a Muslim woman marries a non-Muslim."

The Ministry of Muslim Affairs monitors the activities of Muslims, but it does not restrict their religious practices. The Ministry has authority in all Islamic matters, including mosques, private religious schools (along with the Ministry of Education), religious events, as well as general Islamic guidelines of the state. The High Islamic Council, officially established within the Ministry in October 2004, is mandated to give advice on all religious issues and concerns. It also is in charge of coordinating all Islamic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the country.

The president is required to take a religious oath at inauguration; other government employees are also required to do so, such as magistrates, the presidents of Constitutional Court, Supreme Court, Chamber of Accounts, and the inspector general of state. While there is no penalty established by law, it remains an official custom written in the Constitution for the president of the country and required by law for others. No legal provision exists for opposite practice.

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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

The relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, representatives of the Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches, as well as some NGOs, noted an increase in animosity towards non-Muslims in recent years. There were several reports of school children throwing rocks at churches.

Moderate Muslim clerics attribute the rise in Islamic fundamentalism in part to the international media, local Saudi Salafi/Wahhabi-inspired schools, and the growing number of graduates from Saudi Arabian and Yemeni Islamic schools abroad. The Government does not regulate foreign curriculum programs.

Churches differentiated between the Government's tolerant attitude toward them and what some worried was rising public animosity. Government officials were described as tolerant and respectful; however, the Government did not address the rise in public animosity towards Christians.

French Roman Catholics and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians have been part of society for almost a century and are an example of the considerable familiarity with, and tolerance of, other faiths by the Muslim majority. There are no legal repercussions for conversion from Islam to another religion or for marrying outside of Islam; however, converts may face negative societal, tribal, and familial attitudes towards their decision.

Approximately 60 percent of the population is ethnically Somali. In the ethnic Somali community, clan membership has more influence over a person's life than does religion. Nonetheless, ethnic Somalis who are Christians often are buried according to Islamic traditions by relatives who do not recognize their non-Muslim faith.

The Roman Catholic Church organizes an annual celebration with all the other Christian churches. The Minister of Islamic Affairs has received Ramadan greetings from the Pope. The Minister of Islamic Affairs meets with the heads of other faiths

occasionally and at government-organized ceremonies. There is no formal interfaith dialogue between the government and religious groups, or between various religious groups themselves.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy representatives periodically meet with leaders and members of religious communities and with U.S. NGOs with a missionary component to discuss common interest issues and promote tolerance. The Embassy has engaged several of its English Language Discussion Groups in discussions of religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador uses representational events to promote discussions on religious tolerance and understanding.

Released on September 14, 2007

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