



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Mali

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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.

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

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

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 474,764 square miles, and its population is approximately 11.5 million. Muslims made up an estimated 90 percent of the population; the vast majority of Muslims were Sunni. Approximately 5 percent of the population was Christian, and the Christian community was roughly two-thirds Catholic and one-third Protestant. The remaining 5 percent practiced traditional indigenous religions or no religion. Atheism and agnosticism were rare. Most immigrants came from neighboring countries and either practiced the majority Muslim faith or belonged to a Christian denomination. The majority of citizens practiced their religion daily.

Christian communities tended to be located in and around urban areas, generally in the southern regions. Groups that practiced traditional indigenous religions were located throughout the country, but they were most active in rural areas.

Foreign Islamic preachers operated in the north, while mosques associated with Dawa (an Islamic fundamentalist group) were located in Kidal, Mopti, and Bamako. Dawa has gained some adherents among unemployed youth living in poorer neighborhoods. However, the Dawa group's influence in Kidal was less evident than in the previous years. The Wahhabi movement has grown in Timbuktu and Sikasso. In general, the country's traditional approach to Islam was peaceful and moderate.

Foreign missionary groups operated in the country. The most numerous were Christian groups based in Europe that engaged in development work, primarily the provision of health care and education. A number of U.S.-based Christian missionary groups also were present.

#### 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. The Government sought at all levels to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. There is no state religion. The constitution defines the country as a secular state and allows for religious practices that do not pose a threat to social stability and peace.

The Government requires the registration of all public associations, including religious associations; however, registration confers no tax preference or other legal benefits, and failure to register is not penalized in practice. The registration process is routine and not burdensome. Traditional indigenous religions are not required to register.

Foreign missionary groups operated without government interference, and they did not link the benefits of their development activities to conversion. Members of various religious groups were allowed to proselytize freely.

Laws pertaining to marriage and divorce are based on French legal models. Inheritance laws reflect a mixture of local, French, and Islamic influences.

##### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The minister of Territorial Administration and Local Collectivities may prohibit religious publications that defame another religion; however, there were no reports of instances of such prohibitions during the period covered by this report.

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

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Adherents of different faiths may be found within the same family. Followers of one religion attend religious ceremonies of other religious groups, especially weddings, baptisms, and funerals.

Prior to making important decisions on potentially controversial national issues, the Government consults with a "Committee of Wise Men" that includes the Catholic archbishop and Protestant and Muslim leaders.

Non-Muslim missionary communities live and work in the country without difficulty. Christian missionaries, particularly rural-based development workers, enjoy good relations with their communities.

Islam as practiced in the country is generally tolerant and adapted to local conditions.

In May 2005 eleven Muslims were convicted of resisting authority, disobedience, and rebellion, and sentenced to jail terms ranging from six months to three years for refusing to allow their children to receive polio vaccinations. The group to which they belonged was gaining adherents in the region and was viewed as a serious threat to the polio eradication program since its members are taught to believe that matters pertaining to health should remain in God's hands.

In August 2003 in the village of Yerere, traditional Sunni practitioners attacked Wahhabi Sunnis who were building an authorized mosque. Nine persons died and two were seriously wounded. The Government viewed the case as a serious breach of religious freedom. On April 11, 2005, a criminal court sentenced five of ninety-six defendants to death. Although courts can sentence individuals to death, the Government does not carry out death sentences in practice. Ten defendants were sentenced to life in prison, ten others received sentences ranging from two to ten years, and eighteen female defendants received eight months' to two years' imprisonment. Forty-one others received suspended sentences, and twelve persons were acquitted.

In November 2003 an individual vandalized a statue of the Virgin Mary, shortly before the annual Catholic pilgrimage to the town of Kita. Local authorities quickly responded to the incident, and the responsible individual was arrested and prosecuted. Investigations revealed that he acted independently. The court sentenced him to three years in prison and ordered him to pay a fine.

#### 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. U.S. embassy officers meet regularly with religious authorities and government officials who deal with these issues. Embassy officials expanded dialogue with Muslim groups to promote religious freedom, mutual understanding, and the continued secularism of the Government. The embassy maintains contact with the foreign missionary community and works with government officials and societal leaders to promote religious freedom.

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