



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Niger

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice, as long as persons respected public order, social peace, and national unity.

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 490,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 13.95 million. Islam was the dominant religion and was practiced by more than 90 percent of the population. Approximately 95 percent of the Muslim population was Sunni, while the remaining 5 percent was Shi'a. There were also small communities of Christians and Baha'is. Christians, both Roman Catholics and Protestants, accounted for less than 5 percent of the population but were present particularly in the regions of Maradi, Dogondoutchi, Niamey, and other urban centers with expatriate populations. Christianity was the religion of French colonial institutions, and its followers included many local believers from the educated, the elite, and colonial families, as well as African immigrants from neighboring coastal countries, particularly Benin, Togo, and Ghana. Numbering only a few thousand, the Baha'i were located primarily in Niamey and in communities on the west side of the Niger River, bordering Burkina Faso. A small percentage of the population practiced traditional indigenous religions. There was no information available regarding the number of atheists.

Active Christian missionary organizations included the Southern Baptists, evangelical Baptists, Catholics, Assemblies of God, Seventh-day Adventists, Service in Mission (SIM), and Jehovah's Witnesses.

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, as long as persons respected public order, social peace, and national unity. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

No religious group was subsidized; however, the Islamic Association, which acts as an official advisory committee on religious matters to the Government, conducted biweekly broadcasts on the government-controlled television station. Christian programming was broadcast on private and government radio stations, although the government stations would typically broadcast it only on Sundays and on special occasions, such as Christmas and Easter.

Religious organizations must register with the Interior Ministry. This registration is a formality, and there is no evidence that the Government favors any religion 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 work freely, but their organizations must be registered officially as associations. In addition to proselytizing, most missionary groups generally offered development or humanitarian assistance. The Christian community in Galmi, Tahoua region, benefited from a hospital and health center run by SIM missionaries. The hospital and health center have been in operation for more than forty years.

The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

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

The Government does not impose religious speech restrictions as long as there is no intent to disrespect public order, social peace, and national unity. Some senior-level government employees are required to take religious oaths. The constitution specifies that the president of the republic, the prime minister, the president of the National Assembly, and the president of the Constitutional Court must take an oath on a holy book of their own choosing. Members of the Constitutional Court, Independent National Election Commission, and High Council for Communications must do the same.

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 United States 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

On February 10, 2006, the Government, in conjunction with the country's Islamic organizations, established the Niger Islamic Council. Composed of ten leaders drawn from various Islamic associations and NGOs and ten representatives of government agencies, the council would advise the Government on issues of concern to Muslims, including preaching, mosque construction, and zakat. The council was also charged with promoting a culture of tolerance and social peace. During the installation of the council, the prime minister noted that the organization was also intended "to address behaviors and practices inspired by foreign countries." This remark was broadly interpreted to mean that the council would promote the practice of the moderate, tolerant Islam that the country has known for centuries, while countering extremist interpretations imported from, or influenced by, other Islamic countries. The minister of the interior also announced that a Christian council would be established in the near future.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. There were no further developments in the March 2005 protest incident at an American missionary church compound in the city of Maradi. Of the sixty protestors arrested in this incident, the majority were minors who were released shortly thereafter. Fifteen adult protestors were held in custody for three days before being released as part of a general, nation-wide agreement between the Government and the civil society group that had organized the anti-tax protests. Likewise, there were no further reports of violence or tensions between mainstream Sunni Muslim youth and members of the Wahhabist Izalay sect.

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. The U.S. embassy regularly emphasizes the importance of tolerance in its public statements and in meetings with government officials and members of civil society.

Embassy officers maintained regular contact with Muslim religious leaders, community members, and students. The embassy maintains good relationships with evangelical Christian religious groups, most of which are staffed by long-term resident missionaries and well-known members of the American community. Embassy officials also have contact with the Catholic diocese, the Baha'i community, and Islamic organizations.

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