



Mali

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects 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 religions 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 make up an estimated 90 percent of the population; the vast majority of Muslims are Sunni. Approximately 5 percent of the population is Christian, and the Christian community is roughly two-thirds Catholic and one-third Protestant. The remaining 5 percent practices traditional indigenous religions or no religion. Atheism and agnosticism are rare. Most immigrants come from neighboring countries and either practice the majority Muslim faith or belong to a Christian denomination. The majority of citizens practice their religion daily.

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

Foreign Islamic preachers operate in the north, while mosques associated with Dawa (an Islamic fundamentalist group) are located in Kidal, Mopti, and Bamako. Dawa has gained adherents among the Bellah, who were once slaves of the Tuareg nobles, and also among unemployed youth. The interest these groups have in Dawa is associated with a desire to disassociate themselves from their former masters and, for the youth, to find a source of income. The Dawa group's strong influence in Kidal was less evident than in the previous reporting period, while the Wahhabi movement has grown in Timbuktu and Sikasso. In general, the country's traditional approach to Islam is peaceful and moderate.

Foreign missionary groups operate in the country; the most numerous are Christian groups that are based in Europe and engage in development work, primarily the provision of health care and education. A number of U.S.-based Christian missionary groups also are present.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does 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 operate without government interference, and they do not link the benefits of their development

activities to conversion. Members of various religious groups are allowed to proselytize freely.

Family law, including laws pertaining to divorce, marriage, and inheritance, is based on a mixture of local tradition and Islamic law and practice.

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.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

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

In February 2005, Muslim and Christian organizations joined together to fight AIDS in Mali and registered with the Ministry of Interior. This alliance is also designed to be used by religious communities as a conflict resolution tool. The Government always consults with a "Committee of Wise Men" that includes the Archbishop and Protestant and Muslim leaders before making important decisions on potentially controversial issues regarding the nation.

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, 11 Muslims were convicted of resisting authority, disobedience, and rebellion and sentenced to jail terms ranging from 6 months to 3 years for refusing to allow their children to receive polio vaccinations. The group to which they belong 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, the criminal court sentenced 5 of 104 defendants to death and 84 others to terms of between 3 months probation and 20 years imprisonment.

In November 2003, a statue of the Virgin Mary was vandalized, 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 the individual acted independently. He was sentenced to 3 years in prison and fined.

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 mutual understanding and to encourage the continued secularism of the Government. Embassy officials have also engaged Muslim groups through other events, including an Iftar offered to imams and members of the Muslim community and hosted at the Ambassador's residence in Bamako.

The Embassy invited four Malian imams to the U.S. on an International Visitor's Program, provided funding to restore and preserve manuscript collections in Timbuktu and Jenne, and distributed magazines and other materials printed in Arabic.

The U.S. Embassy maintains contact with the foreign missionary community and works with government officials and societal leaders to promote religious freedom.

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