

# **DJIBOUTI 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom; however, the government restricted religious freedom with the enforcement of a new law granting the Ministry of Islamic Affairs increased oversight of mosques, including sermon topics during Friday prayers and imam selection. There were reports of plainclothes officers monitoring the content of Friday sermons and the activities of people attending mosque services.

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

Embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with government and religious leaders.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 792,000 (July 2013 estimate), of which 94 percent is Sunni Muslim. Groups that together constitute the remaining 6 percent include Roman Catholics, Protestants, Copts, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Jews, and Bahais. Individuals of these groups are generally foreign-born citizens and expatriates. Citizens are officially considered Muslims if they do not specifically identify with another religious group.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and most other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom, but a newly implemented law impedes religious freedom by granting the government oversight of all mosques.

Although the constitution states that Islam is the state religion, the law does not impose sanctions on those who do not observe Islamic teachings or who practice other religious beliefs. The constitution does not prohibit proselytizing.

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The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including mosques, private religious schools (together with the Education Ministry), and religious events.

A law enacted during the year aims to eliminate political activity from mosques, give management oversight of mosque assets to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and permit the ministry to select weekly sermon themes. Implementation of the law is uneven. According to government officials, the law is designed to counter perceived foreign influence in the country's mosques.

The public school system is secular. Public schools do not teach religion. There are approximately 40 private Islamic schools.

Some civil servants, such as inspectors and magistrates, are required to swear secular oaths. The president swears an Islamic religious oath. While there is no penalty established by law for noncompliance, it remains an official custom.

Muslims resolve matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance in family courts whose code includes elements of civil and Islamic law. Civil courts address the same matters for non-Muslims.

The government recognizes only Islamic or civil marriages.

The government requires that a religious group register by submitting an application to the Interior Ministry, which investigates the group. Foreign religious groups have the added step of gaining approval from the Foreign Ministry. Once approved, the group signs a two-year agreement detailing the scope of the group's activities. The approval process is lengthy due in part to required background investigations.

The government permits Muslim foreign clergy and missionaries, as well as a small number of Somali Christian missionaries, to perform charitable works and sell religious books. The government permits Western non-Muslim missionaries to enter the country on tourist visas and to operate NGOs. The government licenses foreign missionary groups to operate orphanages.

### **Government Practices**

Mosques became the site of both pro-opposition protest and government surveillance following the February legislative elections. The Ministry of Islamic

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Affairs reportedly used the new law that regulated mosques to replace imams and temporarily close some mosques. Some imams reported being questioned by security services following sermons with strong political and social justice themes.

Three imams who were arrested, convicted, and imprisoned for their political speeches were not permitted to visit the mosque at the prison where they were being held.

The Al-Ahbash group continued to have a small presence in the country following a 2012 “warning” fatwa from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs’ High Islamic Council, which criticized the group’s beliefs as a “deviation” from Islam. Their madrassah remained closed, and members were not permitted to use a mosque, though the group had a center where they could worship privately. Members did not face additional discrimination as a result of their association with the group.

The minister of Islamic affairs met with the heads of other religious groups, including at government-organized ceremonies.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Societal norms and customs discouraged conversion from Islam, but conversions still occurred. Somali Christian missionaries were allowed to distribute books and pamphlets whereas other Western religious groups were present under the auspices of running charitable NGOs and did not engage in public proselytizing.

Some representatives of Christian denominations noted rare incidents of individual animosity toward non-Muslims.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials met with the secretary general of the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs to discuss religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy organized an iftar attended by the minister of Islamic and cultural affairs, the head of the Fatwa Council, the imam from a U.S. military facility, and other government and civil society members. In her remarks, the Charge d’Affaires shared President Obama’s Ramadan message of the importance of religious freedom in the United States and around the world.