

NIGER 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and worship consistent with public order and national unity. It provides for the separation of state and religion and prohibits religiously affiliated political parties. The government monitored religious expression it viewed as potentially threatening. It interrupted an archbishop's live broadcast on state television in which he appealed to politicians' faith to ease political tensions. Some government officials required imams to submit their sermons for approval before delivering them.

Some Islamic groups accused politicians of not respecting their religious oaths of office to uphold the constitution and civil activists of denigrating Quranic schooling by working against religious teachers who used children in such activities as forced begging.

The embassy discussed religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, and tolerance with the government. The embassy hosted events and organized outreach activities and exchange programs with religious leaders and civil society to promote religious tolerance and encourage interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.5 million (July 2014 estimate). More than 98 percent of the population is Muslim. Approximately 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni and 5 percent are Shia. Roman Catholic and Protestant groups account for less than 2 percent of the population. There are a few thousand Bahais, who reside primarily in Niamey and in communities on the west side of the Niger River. A very small percentage of the population adheres primarily to indigenous religious beliefs. Some individuals adhere to syncretic religious beliefs that combine traditional indigenous practices with Islam.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, specifies separation of religion and state as an unalterable principle, and stipulates equality under the law for all

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regardless of religion. It provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship and the free exercise and expression of faith consistent with public order, social peace, and national unity. The constitution also states no religion or faith shall claim political power or interfere in state affairs and bans political parties based on religious affiliation.

Nongovernmental organizations, including religious organizations, must register with the Ministry of the Interior (MOI). Registration approval is based on submission of required legal documents and vetting of the organization's leaders. Although some unregistered religious organizations reportedly operate without authorization in remote areas, only registered organizations are legally recognized entities. The MOI requires clerics speaking to a large national gathering to either belong to a registered religious organization or get a special permit.

The constitution specifies the president, the prime minister, and the president of the national assembly must take an oath on the holy book of his or her religion. By law, other senior government officials are also required to take religious oaths upon entering office.

Government Practices

The government monitored religious expression it viewed as potentially threatening to public order or national unity. Some government figures, including the Governor of Maradi Region, required imams to submit their sermons to the government for approval before delivery.

The Commission for the Organization of the Hajj and Umrah addressed poor organization of the Hajj by local travel agencies and facilitated travel to Saudi Arabia. Some pilgrims reported the commission made the Hajj less burdensome; however, others said they were delayed in their departure to or from Saudi Arabia due to logistical challenges.

On April 27, state television interrupted the Archbishop of Niamey's live broadcast, in which he read a statement issued by the Catholic bishops of Niger appealing to politicians' faith and calling on them to exercise restraint in the power struggle between the ruling coalition and the opposition. The archbishop stated, "We urge political actors to become aware that insults in the media and political maneuvers thought to be without consequence can generate conflicts... We all

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believe in one God. Muslims and Christians, we share the sacred teaching of our holy books: tolerance, forgiveness, love, and respect of others.”

On February 26, in Zinder, the government National Human Rights Commission organized a workshop on religious tolerance for community leaders and civil society organizations. The Governor of Zinder chaired the opening of the workshop, which was led by two imams.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On October 21, representatives of several Islamic associations issued a statement charging that some political leaders did not respect their religious oath to uphold the constitution. The declaration stated that if politicians could not respect the oath, it should be dropped, in order to avoid the wrath of God on the country. They also criticized civil society activists working against the use of children by some *marabouts* (religious teachers who teach children the Quran) in activities such as forced begging, accusing the activists of denigrating Quranic schooling.

The Muslim-Christian Interfaith Forum remained active in all regions of the country. The forum promoted cooperation among religious leaders from a range of religious groups, and members of the forum met regularly to discuss community peace and other matters of mutual concern.

It was common for Muslims and Christians to attend one another's festivities during their respective holidays.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives continued to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance through meetings with Islamic leaders and support of inter- and intrafaith dialogues throughout the country. Embassy officers also met with several traditional chiefs and religious leaders to discuss religious tolerance.

The Charge d'Affaires hosted an iftar, which included religious leaders from the Nigerien Association for the Call to Islamic Solidarity, the Islamic Association of Niger, the Ahmadiyya Association, and the Islamic Council of Niger, as well as Christian and Bahai leaders, government officials, and members of civil society. This program aimed to show solidarity with the Muslim community and promote

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interfaith dialogue. The Charge delivered remarks emphasizing the importance of interfaith tolerance. At the iftar, the embassy also presented a Nigerien-produced documentary it had funded on Islam and religious freedom in the United States.

The embassy hosted three other iftars and a *sohour* (Ramadan predawn meal) that included discussions of religious tolerance. The embassy's Ramadan outreach program sought to promote respect for freedom of religion and encourage interfaith dialogue. Local media covered the events extensively and positively.

The embassy continued to interact on religious tolerance with an interreligious council, composed of Muslim and Christian leaders in the Maradi region. Several of the council members had previously participated in embassy-sponsored exchange programs. The embassy continued to send religious leaders to the U.S. on these programs and to invite experts from the U.S. to discuss religious tolerance. In April the embassy sponsored a Muslim leader from the eastern region of Diffa to travel to the U.S. to participate in a program on multiculturalism and diversity, which addressed issues related to religious tolerance and the role of religious leaders in promoting mutual respect and acceptance.