



2012 Report on International Religious Freedom - Mali

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Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom in the regions over which it retained control. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

In March rebels seized control of the northern two-thirds of the country. By July the rebels had been ousted by violent extremist groups, including the terrorist Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Ansar al-Dine ("defenders of the faith"). The extremist groups destroyed religious monuments and imposed their own interpretation of Sharia law.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice in the regions over which the government retained control.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government, human rights organizations, and religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The population is approximately 15.8 million, according to a 2011 World Bank report. Muslims constitute an estimated 90 percent of the population. Nearly all Muslims are Sunni and most are Sufi. The population is 4 percent Christian, of whom approximately two-thirds are Roman Catholic and one-third Protestant. The remaining 6 percent adheres to indigenous religious beliefs or professes no religious affiliation. Groups adhering to indigenous religious beliefs reside throughout the country, but are most active in rural areas. Many Muslims and Christians also adhere to some aspects of indigenous beliefs.

There are several mosques associated with the group Dawa al Tabligh, a fundamentalist Muslim group that does not seek to impose its practices outside of its own group. The group has fewer than a thousand members in Bamako.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom in the regions of the country over which the government retains control.

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.

Passports and national identity documents do not designate religious identity. For national identity documents, the law requires a photograph clearly showing the entire face, including hair and both ears. Citizens may not wear religious headdress in official photos for identity documents if the headdress obstructs any part of the face.

The government requires registration of all public associations, including religious groups; however, registration confers no tax preference or other legal benefits and there is no penalty for failure to register. The registration process is routine and not burdensome. The government does not require groups practicing indigenous religions to register.

The Malian High Council of Islam (HCIM), an umbrella organization representing all significant Muslim groups, serves as the main liaison between the government and these groups. Before making important decisions on potentially controversial national issues, the government's policy is to consult with the HCIM and the Committee of Wise Men, a group including the Catholic archbishop of Bamako, Protestant leadership, and other Muslim leaders.

The Ministry of Territorial Administration and Local Collectivities has the authority, not exercised during the year, to prohibit religious publications that "defame" another religion.

Public schools do not offer religious instruction. There are a number of private, parochial, and other religious educational institutions, both Muslim and Christian. Medersas are community-run private Muslim religious schools teaching basic subjects, such as reading, writing, math, science, and history, in addition to Arabic and the Quran. There are 116 Catholic schools in Mali and a very small number of Protestant schools.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Mawloud, the Prophet's Baptism, Easter Monday, Eid al-Fitr (Ramadan), Tabaski (Eid al-Adha), and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Government Inaction

Due to the consequences of the March coup d'etat and the loss of the northern regions of the country to extremist groups, the government was unable to take action against violent extremist groups occupying the northern two-thirds of the country.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

In April members of AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar al-Dine imposed their interpretation of Sharia law on residents of Mali's three northern regions. Those accused of violations received harsh penalties, including execution, amputation, and flogging.

According to human rights groups, members of AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar al-Dine forbade Malians to listen to or perform local music or beat drums during traditional rites of passage. They allegedly also banned baptisms, marriages, and circumcisions.

As many as 600 Christians fled from the northern regions to the south because they feared for their safety. Extremist forces reportedly destroyed churches in the north.

Between July 1 and July 3, members of Ansar al-Dine destroyed seven religious monuments and several tombs classified as UNESCO World Heritage sites in Timbuktu, including the tombs of Sidi Mahmoud, Sidi Yahiya, and Aljoudidi Tamba Tamba. On September 17, members of the MUJAO pulled down the Cheick El Bechir mausoleum, also in Timbuktu. On September 29 in Goundam, Ansar al-Dine destroyed a mausoleum and several tombs in the local cemetery.

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 in the regions over which the government retained control. The country's strong traditions of tolerance and openness extended to religious practice and belief. Members of different religious groups were often part of the same family. Members of one religious group commonly attended the religious ceremonies of other religious groups, especially baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with a wide range of religious leaders, human rights organizations, and government officials.

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