

USDOS – US Department of State

2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Chad

Executive Summary

The Transitional Military Council (CMT) suspended the constitution upon taking power in April after President Idriss Deby died of battle wounds shortly after being declared the winner of the presidential election for what would have been his sixth term. The CMT put in place a Transitional Charter and announced plans to hold a national dialogue followed by the adoption of a new constitution by the end of 2022. The Transitional Charter establishes the state as secular and affirms the separation of religion and state. It provides for freedom of religion and equality before the law without distinction as to religion. It prohibits “any act undermining the republican form and secularism of the state.” The government maintained its ban on the leading Wahhabi association, but media said enforcement of the ban remained difficult and that Wahhabis continued to meet and worship in their own mosques. Local media said one reason Wahhabi groups continued their activities was that a number of government and security officials came from the same region or tribe as the Wahhabi leaders. According to local observers, the government continued to deploy security forces around both Islamic and Christian places of worship, in particular on Fridays around mosques and on Sundays around churches. Media reported that on November 3, security forces entered the courtyard of the Blessed Isidore Bakanja Parish in N’Djamena, defacing the premises and threatening to arrest a priest who tried to film the scene. On October 22, following criticism from the legal community, the central government annulled an agreement establishing the Islamic practice of *diya* (financial compensation paid to victims of violence) in the Christian majority southern province of Mandoul.

Analysts said the country remained relatively free from significant conflict between religious groups and violence from extremist movements, but analysts and human rights groups said poverty and a lack of government services and economic opportunity raised the risks that violent extremism, including violent extremism related to religion, would spread to the country. Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa were reportedly responsible for attacks in the Lake Chad region. Religious leaders continued to raise awareness of the risks of terrorist attacks, which continued throughout the year, particularly in Lac Province, and to advocate for continued additional security in places of worship.

In May, the Charge d’Affaires met with the President of the High Council for Islamic Affairs and the Archbishop of N’Djamena to discuss how the United States could best assist the country in maintaining peaceful coexistence and promoting dialogue immediately following the death of President Deby. On trips to the northern and southern parts of the country, the Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials met with religious leaders to discuss peaceful coexistence and the upcoming national dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.4 million (midyear 2021). According to a 2014-2015 census estimate, 52.1 percent of the population is Muslim, 23.9 percent Protestant, 20 percent Roman Catholic, 0.3 percent animist, 0.2 percent other Christian, 2.8 percent no religion, and 0.7 percent unspecified. Most Muslims adhere to the Sufi Tijaniyah tradition. A small minority hold beliefs associated with Wahhabism, Salafism, or follow the political-religious doctrine espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood. Most Protestants are evangelical Christians. There are small numbers of Baha’is and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Most northerners practice Islam, and most southerners practice Christianity or indigenous religions. There is a significant Muslim presence in the south, but a minimal Christian presence in the north. Religious distribution is mixed in urban areas, and indigenous religions are often practiced to some degree along with Islam and Christianity.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Shortly after being declared the winner of the presidential election for what would have been his sixth term, President Idriss Deby died on April 20 from wounds sustained on the battlefield while commanding a Chadian army unit fighting rebels advancing toward the capital. The CMT, created shortly after Deby's death, suspended the constitution upon taking power in April. The CMT chose Deby's son, army general Mahamat Idriss Deby, to lead it and put in place a Transitional Charter that includes holding a national dialogue, scheduled to begin in May 2022, and enacting a new constitution in 2022. The Transitional Charter establishes the state as secular and affirms the separation of religion and state. The Transitional Charter provides for freedom of religion and equality before the law without distinction as to religion. These rights may be regulated by law and may be limited by law only to ensure mutual respect for the rights of others and for the "imperative" of safeguarding public order and good morals. It prohibits "any act undermining the republican form and secularism of the state." The suspended constitution contained this prohibition as well.

A December 2020 constitutional amendment removed a denominational oath of office that had required government directors and secretaries general and above to take an oath "under God" or "under Allah." The Transitional Charter is silent on this point.

Under the law, all associations, religious or otherwise, must register with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralized Territorial Collectivities. Associations must provide a list of all the founding members and their positions in the organization, founders' resumes, copies of the founders' identification cards, minutes of the establishment meetings, a letter to the minister requesting registration, principal source of the organization's revenue, address of the organization, a copy of its rules and procedures, and statutory documents of the organization. The ministry conducts background checks on every founding member and establishes a six-month temporary, but renewable, authorization to operate, pending final authorization and approval. Failure to register with the ministry means that organizations are not considered legal entities and may not open bank accounts or enter into contracts; it may also lead to the banning of a group. Group founders or board members may be subject to one month to one year in prison and a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 CFA francs (\$86-\$860) for failure to register. Registration does not confer tax preferences or other benefits.

Burqas, defined by ministerial notice as any garment where one sees only the eyes, are forbidden by ministerial decree. The ministerial notice also applies to niqabs, although this ban reportedly is not enforced.

The Transitional Charter states public education shall be secular. The government prohibits religious instruction in public schools but permits religious groups to operate private schools, and there are numerous schools operated by Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant groups.

The High Council for Islamic Affairs (HCIA), an independent government body, oversees Islamic religious activities, including some Arabic-language schools and institutions of higher learning, and represents the country's Muslim community at international Islamic forums. The government approves those nominated by members of the HCIA to serve on the council. Wahhabis are nominated to serve on the council but have not participated due to their stated concerns regarding the council's role in the government ban on their activities. Muslim Brotherhood adherents also sat on the council, operating under the umbrella of Sufi groups rather than as overt representatives of Muslim Brotherhood groups. The Grand Imam of N'Djamena, who is selected by a committee of Muslim elders and approved by the government, is the de jure president of the HCIA and oversees the heads of the HCIA branches and grand imams from each of the country's 23 regions. He has the authority to restrict Muslim groups from proselytizing, to regulate the content of mosque sermons, and to control activities of Islamic charities.

The law prohibits media reports that are likely to "incite hatred."

The Office of the Director of Religious and Traditional Affairs under the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralized Territorial Collectivities oversees religious matters. The office is responsible for mediating intercommunal conflict, reporting on religious practices, and ensuring religious freedom. It also reports concerns and suggestions regarding religious activities to the Minister of Territorial Administration, who has the authority to ban or sanction activities. The position of office director rotates every two years among Muslims, Protestants, and Catholics. The office contains a special bureau for Hajj and Umrah under the supervision of the Presidency of the Republic, with members chosen annually by presidential decree. The HCIA deals directly with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralized Territorial Collectivities or with the civil office of the President of the Republic to address concerns with Wahhabi groups.

The Transitional Charter is silent on the question of military service, but military service was obligatory under the constitution (suspended in April), which prohibited invoking religious belief to “avoid an obligation dictated by the national interest.” This statute largely applies in case of wartime mobilization, since the country does not have universal military conscription.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

The government maintained its ban on the leading Wahhabi group, Ansar al-Sunna. According to civil rights organizations, enforcement was especially difficult due to strained government capacity during the ongoing political transition, and adherents continued to meet and worship in their own mosques. Local media said one reason Wahhabi groups continued their activities was that a number of government and security officials came from the same region or tribe as the Wahhabi leaders. Local media reported that the HCIA president reconciled with Wahhabi groups, in contrast with the approach of his predecessor, who was generally perceived to be anti-Wahhabist. Due to the government ban on their activities, Wahhabis continued to receive financial support from abroad as individuals rather than as a group, according to local media.

According to local observers, the government continued to deploy security forces around both Islamic and Christian places of worship, in particular on Fridays around mosques and on Sundays around churches.

Media reported that on November 3, security forces forcibly entered the Blessed Isidore Bakanja Parish courtyard in N'Djamena on a vaguely defined “mission” (in the words of the security force members involved), verbally harassed a priest inside who tried to film the scene as security force members defaced the premises, and aggressively confiscated his phone. Following the incident, the government made no arrests or took any other action. Archbishop of N'Djamena Goetbe Edmond Djitangar said, “We denounce certain attitudes and behaviors of contempt that some compatriots hold towards the religious beliefs of others. This is a form of intolerance that should have no place in a pluralistic society like ours.” He said this incident followed other government actions against the Catholic Church, citing a 2018 case where security forces used tear gas inside of a parish “for no apparent reason” while dispersing protesters during a demonstration, and a 2020 case in which a local curate was prohibited from attending Sunday Mass as a result of COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings.

Although he had the legal authority to do so, the Grand Imam of N'Djamena reportedly did not in practice regulate the content of sermons.

In April, the transitional government was sworn in without using a denominational oath of office.

Media reported religious tensions existed in the form of farmer-herder violence. The disputes reportedly were caused by land use issues rather than religion, though herders are commonly associated with Islam and farmers with Christianity. Religious tensions were sometimes raised when the use of Islamic *diya* – financial compensation paid to victims of violence – was proposed by local authorities as a means of resolving conflicts with Christian groups that refused to pay or accept diya. On October 22, following criticism from the legal community, the central government annulled an agreement establishing the practice of diya in the Christian majority southern province of Mandoul. The agreement, signed on October 15, would have defined suggested compensation amounts, including for accidental and intentional deaths. The agreement and subsequent annulment followed a 2019 interministerial order regulating the practice of diya, with the criminal code taking precedence in any conflict involving diya practices.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Analysts stated the country, which comprises a diverse society with many tribal, ethnic, and religious identities, remained relatively free from significant conflict between religious groups. Most conflicts took place between farmers and herders over competing uses of land, not religious identity, according to observers. Analysts stated that lengthy periods of largely southern and Christian rule (1960-1979), followed by largely northern and Muslim rule (1979-2021), against the backdrop of widespread poverty created an association between religion and geographic region that political actors continued to exploit for their purposes. Media said N'Djamena and other large cities self-segregated according to religious divisions.

Analysts and human rights groups said poverty and a lack of government services and economic opportunity raised the risks that violent extremism, including extremism related to religion, could spread to the country, especially in the Lake Chad region, where Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa launched attacks against government soldiers and unarmed civilians during the year. A Boko Haram attack occurred in the Lake Chad region in August 2021, killing 26 Chadian soldiers. The Chadian military remained active in its fight against Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa in the Lake Chad region.

Religious leaders, including imams, continued to raise awareness among adherents of the risks of terrorist attacks, particularly in Lac Province, and to advocate for continued additional security in places of worship. On a television program broadcast on Evangelical TV (ETV) during Easter, pastors and guests called on the government to address the root causes of religious extremism and recruitment to extremist causes by expanding access to economic opportunity.

In accordance with the legal prohibition against “inciting hatred,” media coverage continued to not mention instances of religious tension or conflict, instead using the term “communalism” – allegiance to a specific group or community rather than to wider society – to refer in general to divisions among various groups or communities, whether based on geographic, ethnic, religious, or other loyalties.

The Regional Forum on Interfaith Dialogue, comprising representatives of evangelical Protestant churches, the Catholic Church, and the Islamic community, did not meet during the year after meeting two or three times in 2020. The National Prayer Day originally scheduled for November 28 was rescheduled for January 29, 2022.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The embassy amplified messages promoting religious freedom and tolerance throughout the year. On May 5, the Charge d’Affaires met with the President of the High Council for Islamic Affairs and the Archbishop of N’Djamena to discuss how the United States could best assist the country in maintaining peaceful coexistence and promoting dialogue immediately following the death of President Deby. On a trip to the south from June 25-30, embassy officers met with interfaith religious leaders in Bongor, Kelo, and Moundou to discuss interfaith dialogue, promote peaceful coexistence, and support efforts to counter extremist messages related to religion.

During a trip to the north in November, the Charge d’Affaires met with local religious leaders in Abeche (Muslims, Protestants, and Catholics) to discuss peaceful coexistence and the upcoming national dialogue. On November 23 and 24, the Charge d’Affaires met with the Grand Imam and President of the High Council to discuss the transitional period and upcoming national dialogue and exchange good wishes on the occasion of the National Prayer Day for Peaceful Cohabitation.

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