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2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Djibouti

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion, but mandates equality for all faiths. The government maintained its authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including assets and personnel of all mosques. Implementation of the decree effecting state control of mosques, conversion of imams into civil service employees, and the transfer of mosque property and assets to the government continued. A presidential decree forbidding all outdoor gatherings from late December 2015 to mid-April delayed a planned religious gathering.

Norms and customs continued to discourage conversion from Islam. There was a report of abuse and intimidation against a convert to Christianity in the Markazi refugee camp. There were also reports of discrimination in employment and education against converts to Christianity.

U.S. embassy officials met with the secretary general of the Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs to discuss issues of religious freedom, including the transfer and control of assets and personnel from individual mosques to the state. The government-run newspaper, *La Nation*, featured President Obama's Ramadan statement on the front page. The Ambassador and other embassy officials also shared President Obama's Ramadan and Eid al-Adha messages on the importance of religious freedom with government and civil society leaders, including at an embassy-hosted iftar and on the embassy's Facebook page.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 847,000 (July 2016 estimate), of which 94 percent is Sunni Muslim. Shia Muslims, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Jews, Bahais, and atheists constitute the remaining 6 percent. Non-Muslims are generally foreign-born citizens and expatriates, highly concentrated in Djibouti City.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Islam is the religion of the state, according to the constitution. The constitution mandates the government respect all faiths and guarantees equality before the law, regardless of one's religion. The law does not impose sanctions on those who do not observe Islamic teachings or who practice other religious beliefs. The constitution prohibits religiously based political parties.

The Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs has authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including mosques, religious events, and private Islamic schools. The Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs and the Ministry of Education jointly oversee the school curricula and teacher certification of approximately 40 Islamic schools. The public school system is secular.

The president swears an Islamic religious oath.

Muslims may bring matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance either to family courts whose code includes elements of civil and Islamic law or to civil courts. Civil courts address the same matters for non-Muslims. In legal matters, citizens are officially considered Muslims if they do not specifically identify with another religious group.

The government requires all foreign and domestic non-Muslim religious groups to register by submitting an application to the Ministry of Interior, which conducts a lengthy background investigation of the group. Domestic and foreign Muslim religious groups must inform the Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs of their existence and intent to operate and are neither subject to registration nor investigation by the Ministry of Interior. Muslim and non-Muslim foreign religious groups must also gain approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to operate in the country. Once approved, every foreign religious group signs a one-year agreement detailing the scope of its activities. Foreign religious groups must submit quarterly reports to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and renew their agreements every year. The quarterly report details the activities, origin of funding for activities, scope of work completed, and identifies beneficiaries. Non-Muslim religious groups may not operate in the interim while awaiting registration.

The government is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The government declared a reservation regarding proselytizing in open public spaces.

Government Practices

The Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs continued its efforts to implement a 2014 decree executing a law on state control of mosques, which converted the status of imams to civil service employees under the ministry and transferred ownership of mosque properties and other assets to the government. Government officials stated the decree aimed to eliminate political activity from mosques, provide greater government oversight of mosque assets and activities, and counter foreign influence. The implementation process has been slow. Fewer than half of the mosques in the country had an imam who was considered a civil service employee. The High Islamic Council met with an association of civil service employee imams to provide training and to have discussions. The training and discussions covered topics on the management of facilities, operational needs, the volume of microphones, not using the mosque as a political platform, and the uniformity of sermons across all mosques.

At the beginning of the year President Ismail Omar Guelleh issued a decree forbidding outside gatherings from December 2015 to mid-April. The Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs postponed a regional conference of Muslim religious leaders until after the April election.

The government continued to permit registered non-Islamic groups, including Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches, to operate freely, according to Christian leaders. For several of these groups, the government subsidized the cost of utilities at church properties as it considered some church properties to be part of the national patrimony. Religious groups not independently registered with the government, such as Ethiopian Protestant and non-Sunni Muslim congregations, operated under the auspices of registered groups. Smaller groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Bahais, were not registered with the government, but operated privately without incident, according to Christian leaders.

The government legally recognized Islamic marriages conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and civil marriages conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior for non-Muslims and interfaith couples. The government also recognized non-Islamic religious marriages, when documentation from the religious organization performing the ceremony was provided.

The Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs sponsored a program in which religious leaders visited public schools for one-hour sessions to answer students' questions about religion. These weekly sessions were not mandatory.

The government allowed non-Islamic religious groups to host events and proselytize on the groups' private property; in practice, groups refrained from proselytizing in public spaces, such as hotels or street corners due

to restrictions by the government. The government permitted a limited number of Christian missionaries to sell religious books and pamphlets at a local book store.

The government issued visas to foreign Islamic and non-Islamic clergy and missionaries, but required they belong to registered religious groups before they could work in the country or operate nongovernmental organizations.

In response to the violent attack on an Orlando nightclub by a Muslim claiming allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), President Ismail Omar Guelleh sent messages of condolence condemning the attack and expressing his solidarity with the victims' families. The government-run newspaper, *La Nation*, published President Guelleh's message.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Societal norms and customs discouraged conversion from Islam, but conversions still occurred. There was a report from the Markazi refugee camp (a camp for Yemeni refugees) of abuse and intimidation of a convert to Christianity by fellow refugees and local authorities. Christian groups reported discrimination in employment and education against converts to Christianity who changed their names.

Some representatives of Christian denominations reported incidents of animosity by individuals, such as throwing stones at church property. Representatives of Christian denominations reached out to students and staff at neighboring schools in an effort to foster religious tolerance and understanding, leading to a decrease in stoning of church property, according to a Christian leader.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with the secretary general of the Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs to discuss issues of religious freedom, including the transfer of mosques' assets and personnel to government control and outreach to refugee camps. The Ambassador shared President Obama's Ramadan message on the importance of religious freedom with government, religious, and civil society leaders, including at an embassy-hosted iftar. The Ambassador posted on the embassy's Facebook page an Eid al-Adha greeting in French, Arabic, Afar, and Somali, while wearing traditional Djiboutian clothing. Over 100,000 people viewed the video, and the government-run newspaper, *La Nation*, released an article about the post. *La Nation* featured President Obama's Ramadan statement on the front page.

Embassy officials met with Christian and Muslim leaders to discuss interfaith relations and issues of respect for religious freedom. For instance, during a meeting to discuss the safety and security concerns of converts to Christianity, a Christian leader expressed his willingness to assist the converts and provided housing and protection for a Yemeni refugee.