

2017 REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM - MALI

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and grants individuals freedom of religion in conformity with the law. The law criminalizes abuses against religious freedom. Terrorist groups used violence and launched attacks against civilians, security forces, peacekeepers, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam. In the center of the country, Katiba Macina of the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) attacked multiple towns in Mopti Region, threatening Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious communities reportedly for heresy. President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita made a public statement to congratulate Archbishop Jean Zerbo when Pope Francis elevated him to the rank of cardinal on June 28.

Muslim religious leaders continued to frequently condemn extremist interpretations of sharia, and non-Muslim religious leaders also condemned religious extremism. Religious leaders, including Muslims and Catholics, jointly called for peace among all faiths at a celebration marking Eid al-Fitr in June hosted by President Keita. The president of the High Islamic Council in Mali announced the necessity for all religious leaders to work toward national unity and social cohesion. An international conference on conflict management and religious tolerance, which gathered both Christian and Muslim religious leaders, called for tolerance and mutual understanding among religions.

U.S. embassy officials met with the president and vice president of the High Islamic Council in Mali and called upon their interlocutors to promote peace and tolerance among religions. The U.S. Ambassador spoke about religious tolerance at an embassy-sponsored training program on entrepreneurship, organized by a Muslim organization. The U.S. government sponsored an exchange program to support religious diversity and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.9 million (July 2017 estimate). Muslims constitute an estimated 95 percent of the population. Nearly all Muslims are Sunni and most follow Sufism. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Christians, of whom approximately two-thirds are Roman Catholic and one-third Protestant, groups with indigenous religious beliefs, and those with no religious affiliation. Groups adhering to indigenous religious beliefs reside throughout the country but mostly in rural areas. Many Muslims and Christians also adhere to some aspects of indigenous beliefs. There are fewer than 1,000 individuals in Bamako and an unknown number outside of the capital associated with the Muslim group Dawa al-Tablig.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of religion in conformity with the law.

According to the penal code, any act of discrimination based on religion or any act impeding the freedom of religious observance or worship is punishable with up to five years' imprisonment or 10 years' banishment (prohibition from residing in the country). The penal code also states any religiously motivated persecution of a group of persons constitutes a crime against humanity. There is no statute of limitations for such crimes.

The law requires registration of all public associations, including religious groups, except for groups practicing indigenous religious beliefs; however, registration confers no tax preferences or other legal benefits, and there is no penalty for failure to register. To register, applicants must submit copies of a declaration of intent to create an association, notarized copies of bylaws, copies of policies and regulations, notarized copies of a report of the first meeting of the association's general assembly, and lists of the names of the leaders of the association with signature samples of three of the leaders. Upon review, the Ministry of Territorial Administration grants the certificate of registration.

The constitution prohibits public schools from offering religious instruction, but private schools may do so. Islamic religious schools, which are privately funded and known locally as *medersas* (a variant of *madrassah*), teach Islam but are required to adhere to the standard government curriculum. Non-Muslim students are not required to attend Islamic religious classes. Catholic schools teach the standard educational curriculum and do not require Muslim students to attend Catholic religious classes. Informal schools, known locally as Quranic schools, which some students attend in lieu of public schools, do not follow a government curriculum and offer exclusively religious instruction.

The law defines marriage as secular. Couples who seek legal recognition must have a civil ceremony, which they may follow with a religious ceremony. Under the law, a man may choose between a monogamous or polygamous marriage. The law states that the religious customs of the deceased determine inheritance rights. Civil courts consider these customs when they adjudicate such cases; however, many cases are settled informally.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

By year's end, the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission, established in 2014, continued to make slow progress on its core functions and implementation of full-fledged operations on the ground. The commission stated it had established contact with victims of the country's armed conflict and presented its mission and services to affected communities, including victims of religious persecution. A commission member reported that five *antennes* (mobile units for taking depositions) were established around the country, and victims made 6,263 depositions. The government provided compensation for commissioners and equipment, and other donors provided additional support to the commission.

The minister of religious affairs and traditions was responsible for promoting religious tolerance and coordinating national religious activities such as pilgrimages and religious holidays for followers of all religions. The minister, a Muslim, spoke during a Catholic Mass at the national cathedral in the presence of Archbishop of Bamako Jean Zerbo in June.

On June 28, President Keita made a public statement to congratulate Archbishop Zerbo when Pope Francis elevated him to the rank of cardinal, the first Malian ever to hold the title. The president accompanied several ministers to meet Cardinal Zerbo at the Bamako international airport upon his return from Italy in a public show of congratulations.

ABUSES BY FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

Throughout the country, violent armed groups, including Ansar al-Dine and its affiliate Macina Liberation Front (MLF/Katiba Macina), AQIM, and al-Mourabitoun, sometimes united under the umbrella group Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), continued to carry out targeted attacks against security forces, UN peacekeepers, civilians, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam.

The Malian Episcopal Conference reported multiple incidents of harassment. In September Katiba Macina members chased Christians from the town of Bodwal and threatened to kill them if they prayed in the town's sole church. Likewise, since April 15, Katiba Macina had forbidden Christian services in the church and the raising of pigs in the village of Djidja. On August 15, unidentified armed men believed to be Katiba Macina threatened the local population and told them Christian music and prayers were banned in the town of Djanweli. In the village of Bodwal, armed men also believed to be Katiba Macina threatened Christians and forced them to remove their church bell. On September 19, armed men believed to be Katiba Macina vandalized the church in Dobara village. The men burned all property and material inside the church and threatened to kill anyone who prayed there. In the town of Douna on October 6, unidentified armed men believed to be Katiba Macina attacked and burned everything inside the church and threatened the Christian population with death if they prayed inside it. In the same incident, the armed men also threatened the Muslim population because of the manner in which they held their hands during prayer and ordered the striking and relocation of the *Toguna* – a traditional public tent where elderly persons gather in the Dogon tradition – because it was too close to the mosque.

The media reported armed men believed to be Katiba Macina threatened to kidnap the village chief of Kouakourou for refusing to hand over village youths who celebrated Eid al-Adha, a Muslim holiday, with firecrackers in August.

In May media reported a group linked to al-Qaida stoned an unmarried couple to death in public in Taghilt. The group accused the couple of violating Islamic law by living together without being married.

In February armed men kidnapped a Colombian nun from Karangasso, where she worked in a health center. In July JNIM kidnappers released a video of several hostages in their custody, including the nun. She remained in captivity at year's end.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslim and non-Muslim religious leaders frequently and jointly condemned extremist interpretations of Islam.

On July 13, the Malian High Islamic Council published a document that regretted "some drifts observed in the preaching in some mosques, in public places, and in the media, including social networks." The document further demanded "immediate cessation of violence in all its forms and in all spaces" across the country, and it urged Islamic preachers to "make respectful and gentle remarks and to prioritize themes aiming at reinforcing the rapprochement of the different religious sensibilities."

In June Catholic and Muslim religious leaders called for peace among different faiths at an Eid al-Fitr ceremony hosted by President Keita. On September 10, the president of the High Islamic Council in Mali, Mahamoud Dicko, announced the necessity for all religious leaders to work toward national unity and social cohesion. Christian and Muslim religious leaders participating in an international conference on conflict management and religious tolerance in June called for tolerance and mutual understanding among religious groups.

Members of religious groups commonly attended the religious ceremonies of other religious groups, especially baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officers spoke with a wide range of influential religious leaders and human rights organizations, including the president and vice president of the High Islamic Council in Mali. Embassy officials called on their interlocutors to advocate for tolerance and peace among religious groups, and organized a number of activities to emphasize the importance of religious tolerance and freedom. The embassy sponsored a training program on entrepreneurship organized by the Malian Young Muslim's Association on September 25-29 for 100 men and women, at which the minister of religious affairs and traditions, the vice president of the High Islamic Council in Mali, the U.S. Ambassador, and other embassy officials spoke publicly about religious tolerance.

A number of prominent religious leaders associated with the country's two chief Sufi and Salafist groups participated in a U.S. government exchange program focusing on themes related to religious diversity and tolerance. The embassy maintained regular contact with Christian missionaries during the year. Some expressed concern about the increased influence of organizations they characterized as violent and extremist in remote areas, which they believed could affect their ability to continue working in the long term.

Some of the embassy's most widely shared social media postings during the year included messages from the Ambassador on the occasions of Ramadan, Easter, Eid al-Fitr, and especially Eid al-Adha. These messages highlighted the importance of tolerance and respect for diversity.