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2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Mali

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
July 30, 2012

[Covers calendar year from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011]

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The embassy discussed religious freedom with the government, human rights organizations, and religious leaders as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

Muslims constitute an estimated 90 percent of the population. Nearly all Muslims are Sunni. Most of these are Sufi, although a sizeable minority rejects Sufi traditions and refers to itself as Sunnite or Ahl-al Sunna. The population is 4 percent Christian, of whom approximately two-thirds are Roman Catholic and one-third Protestant. The remaining 6 percent of the population practices indigenous religious beliefs or professes no religious affiliation. The majority of citizens practice their religious beliefs and traditions daily. Groups that practice indigenous religious beliefs reside throughout the country but are most active in rural areas; many Muslims and Christians also practice aspects of indigenous beliefs.

There are several mosques associated with the group Dawa al Tabligh; however, its influence appears to have declined in recent years.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

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.

Religious identity is not designated on passports or national identity documents. For national identity documents, the law requires a photograph, which clearly shows the entire face, including hair and the two 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 associations; however, registration confers no tax preference or other legal benefits, and failure to register is not penalized in practice. The registration process is routine and not burdensome. The government does not require indigenous religious groups to register.

The Malian High Council of Islam (HCIM) is an umbrella organization with representatives from all significant Muslim organizations in the country. It serves as the main liaison between the government and hundreds of these groups. The government frequently consults with the HCIM on social issues of national interest. Prior to making important decisions on potentially controversial national issues, the government also consults with the Committee of Wise Men, which include the Catholic archbishop and Protestant and Muslim leaders.

The minister of territorial administration and local collectivities may prohibit religious publications that "defame" another religion; however, there were no reports of such prohibitions during the year.

The government is secular. Public schools do not offer religious instruction. A number of private, parochial, and other religious institutions, both Muslim and Christian, exist, and parents face no legal restrictions to enrolling their children in these schools. Medersas, a Malian version of Qur'anic schools elsewhere known as madrassahs, are growing community-run private religious schools that provide schooling in basic subjects such as reading, writing, math science and history, in addition to Arabic and the Koran.

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.

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. The country's strong traditions of tolerance and openness extended to religious practice and belief. Adherents of different religious groups were often part of the same family. Followers of one religion attended religious ceremonies of other religious groups, especially baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy maintained contact with a wide range of religious leaders, human rights organizations and government officials to discuss the status of religious freedom as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During the year, the public affairs section of the U.S. embassy published and distributed a civics textbook in Arabic for medersas.