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2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Djibouti

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 as part of its broader agenda to address human rights concerns. Embassy outreach to the religious community included hosting an iftar (an evening meal during Ramadan) that was attended by prominent citizens from both government and religious circles.

Section I. Religious Demography

More than 99 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. There are a small number of Roman Catholics, Protestants, Copts, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, and Baha'is. Foreign-born citizens, as well as many expatriate residents, are often members of these religious groups. Citizens are officially considered Muslims if they do not specifically identify with another religious group.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

Although Islam is the state religion, the government imposes no sanctions on those who choose to ignore Islamic teachings or to practice other religious beliefs.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including mosques, private religious schools (with the Ministry of Education), religious events, as well as general Islamic guidelines of the state. The High Islamic Council within

the ministry has the mandate to give advice on all religious concerns. The Council also is responsible for coordinating all Islamic non-governmental organizations in the country.

There are approximately 40 private Islamic schools nationwide. The public school system is secular and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs has no oversight in its operation or that of secular private schools, e.g., an international school.

The president and other government employees, including magistrates, are required to take religious oaths. While there is no penalty established by law for noncompliance, it remains an official custom. A small number of non-Muslims hold civil service positions without discrimination.

For matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, Muslims are directed to family courts whose code includes elements of civil law and Islamic law. Civil courts address the same matters for non-Muslims.

The government allows civil marriage only for non-Muslim foreign residents. Muslims are required to marry in a religious ceremony.

The government requires that a religious group register by submitting an application to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which, along with the Ministry of the Interior, investigates the group. Once approved, the group signs an initial two-year bilateral agreement detailing the scope of the group's activities.

Foreign clergy and missionaries perform charitable works and sell religious books. The government licenses foreign missionary groups to operate orphanages. Public schools do not teach religion. The constitution does not specifically prohibit proselytizing.

Several different Christian denominations maintain close informal ties to each other. The Minister of Islamic Affairs meets with the heads of other religious groups occasionally, including at government-organized ceremonies.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, the Ascension of the Prophet, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and the Islamic New Year.

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. Societal norms and customs discouraged proselytizing by non-Muslims and conversion from Islam; non-Muslim religious groups generally did not engage in public proselytizing.

The relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some representatives of Christian denominations noted rare incidents of individual animosity towards non-Muslims. The presence of French Roman Catholics and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, part of society for almost a century, are continuing examples of tolerance of other religious groups by the Muslim majority.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U. S. embassy promoted cultural ties by hosting an iftar during Ramadan. The iftar was attended by prominent citizens, both in the government and the private sector.
