

2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Djibouti

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but mandates equality for persons of all faiths. Religious groups must register with the government, which conducts lengthy background checks as part of the registration process. Foreign religious workers must obtain a work permit and purchase annual residency cards.

The government maintained its authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including assets and personnel of all mosques. The government continued to closely regulate all mosques and provide imams with the scripts for their Friday sermons. The government continued to mandate a civic and moral education course based on Islam for all students in public schools as well as in private schools run by non-Muslim religious organizations. To counter violent extremism and foster what it described as moderate Islamic beliefs in the region, the government coordinated its strategy with Somalia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia through meetings and exchanges of experiences.

Norms and customs discouraged conversion from Islam. Muslim and Christian religious leaders noted traditional social networks often ostracized converts from Islam.

U.S. embassy officials met with government officials to discuss violent extremism in the region, which was often exacerbated by religion, and the importance of equitable treatment of religious groups, especially in refugee camps. Embassy officials also met with religious leaders to discuss their perception of government attitudes towards religious practice and their efforts to combat violent extremism and address the causes of radicalization, such as lack of employment.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 957,273 (midyear 2022), of which 94 percent are Sunni Muslim. According to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Shia Muslims, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Jews, Baha'is, and atheists constitute the remaining 6 percent. Non-Muslim populations are generally concentrated in Djibouti City and include foreign-born citizens and expatriates.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates the registered refugee population at 36,500, of whom 39.4 percent are from Somalia, 39.1 percent from Ethiopia, 18.4 percent from Yemen,

and 3 percent from Eritrea. Refugees are both Muslim and non-Muslim, but no data exists on their religious breakdown.

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 constitution prohibits religiously based political parties.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs (a form of charitable trust or endowment) has authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including mosques, religious events, and private Islamic schools. Imams are civil service employees of the ministry; the government owns mosque properties and other assets. The ministry's High Islamic Council vets all Friday prayer service sermons.

The president swears an Islamic religious oath.

The government requires all foreign and domestic religious groups to register by submitting an application to the Ministry of Interior, which conducts a lengthy background investigation of the group. The investigation reviews group leadership, religious affiliation, sources of finance, and the group's objectives within the country. Ties to religious groups considered extremist, strong political agendas, and relations with unfriendly foreign nations are factors that could cause a group's application to be rejected. Domestic and foreign Muslim religious groups must also inform the High Islamic Council at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs of their existence and intent to operate. 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, and its workers must obtain work permits and purchase annual residency cards. Foreign religious groups must submit quarterly reports to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and renew their agreements every year. The quarterly report details activities, origin of funding for activities, and scope of work completed, and it identifies beneficiaries. Religious groups may not operate in the interim while awaiting registration.

Muslims may bring personal status 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. Citizens are officially considered Muslims if they do not specifically identify with another religious group. Cases in family courts, referred to as sharia courts, have two stages. The complainant first brings the grievance to the neighborhood council, which either issues a judgment or transmits the case to the family court. If the complainant is not satisfied with the decision of the qadi or the family court, he or she may appeal in the family trial court or to the Supreme Sharia Council.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs and the Ministry of Education jointly oversee the curricula and teacher certification of approximately 40 Islamic schools, which represent a small percentage of the country's schools, except for two religious schools run by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the country, which follow the Saudi curriculum. Other international schools are permitted to offer their own curriculum. The public school system is secular and offers no courses on specific religions; religion in general is taught, along with other subjects. Private schools run by religious organizations

must offer a civic and moral education course based on Islamic principles to all students, including non-Muslims.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs also ensures that imams trained in Islamic institutes abroad follow an interpretation of Islam that aligns with the government's respect for religious tolerance. The High Islamic Council supervises their preaching and provides training to imams who were trained abroad before they begin their duties to ensure they continue to remain in line with the government's interpretation of Islam.

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

Government Practices

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs continued to oversee all Islamic matters during the year, including providing imams with their Friday sermons; imams were not permitted to stray from their approved scripts. According to ministry representatives, government control and oversight of mosques remained necessary to preclude political activity from mosques and counter foreign "extremist" influence. To counter violent extremism in the country and in the region, and to foster moderate Islamic beliefs, the ministry coordinated its strategy with Somalia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia through meetings and exchanges of experiences. The government launched an Institute of Peace named Al-Mutasaweqa (moderate thoughts) to host regional conferences, religious gatherings, and training. The institute aimed to bring together religious leaders of the region to discuss a peaceful interpretation of Islam and interfaith exchanges. During the year, the institute hosted a conference with religious scholars from Somaliland and Somalia on tolerance, peace building, and brotherhood.

The government continued to permit registered non-Islamic groups, comprising Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches, to operate freely, according to Christian leaders. Muslim citizens were permitted to enter Christian churches, although societal pressure continued to discourage conversion. There were no limitations on the importation of religious literature for registered non-Islamic groups. No other Christian or non-Christian groups were legally recognized by the government during the year, although the Church of Scientology maintained its registration as a commercial entity. The government subsidized the cost of utilities at certain church properties of registered non-Islamic groups, since it considered these church properties to be part of the national patrimony. Religious groups not registered with the government, including the Ethiopian Protestant and non-Sunni Muslim congregations, continued to operate without government sanction.

In July, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs resumed organizing the annual pilgrimage to Mecca after a two-year suspension due to COVID-19 restrictions. One thousand individuals participated.

The government continued to allow non-Islamic religious groups to host events and proselytize on the groups' private property. The government continued to permit a limited number of Christian missionaries to sell religious books and pamphlets at a bookstore in Djibouti City.

The government continued to issue visas to foreign Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant clergy and missionaries, but it required them to belong to registered religious groups before they could work in the country or operate nongovernmental organizations. There were an estimated 20-30 foreign religious workers in the country during the year. The government continued to require foreign religious leaders to regularize their status by purchasing an annual residency card for 24,000 Djiboutian francs (\$136).

There were no non-Muslims in senior government positions.

Local public schools continued to observe only Islamic holidays, but under the direction of the Ministry of Education, schools in refugee camps continued to permit students of other religious groups to miss class for their respective religious holidays. The ministry continued its multiyear efforts to revise the national curriculum, including reforming civic and moral education courses to promote religious inclusivity.

The government continued to require that a civic and moral education course based on Islamic principles be taught in public schools across the country. Christian religious leaders continued to say that private schools run by non-Muslim religious groups were required to teach the same course to students who were studying Islam voluntarily.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Societal norms and customs discouraged conversion from Islam, but conversions reportedly occurred, particularly for marriages with non-Muslim partners. Muslim and Christian leaders stated conversion from Islam was detrimental to a person's social status; Muslim religious leaders said traditional social networks often ostracized converts from Islam.

Imams regularly worked together to counter violent extremism in the country and identified high unemployment as the main driver of radicalization. They advocated for increased civil society empowerment to engage in community-based efforts to combat violent extremism such as providing additional outlets and community connections for the unemployed or underemployed.

Religious leaders of all faiths said societal religious tolerance remained high in the country, with members of different religious groups living side by side without friction.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. Embassy officials met with officials from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs to discuss violent extremism in the region, which was often exacerbated by religion, and the importance of equitable treatment of religious groups, especially in refugee camps. Embassy officials also met with religious representatives to discuss their perceptions of government attitudes towards religious groups, which they said continued to be positive.

The Ambassador met with Pastor Pierre Thiam of the Evangelical Protestant Church to discuss the church's vocational school. The school provides skill-training workshops for refugees, unaccompanied minor children, women, and persons with disabilities. Pastor Thiam said he was grateful to the government for subsidizing electricity and water for the school.

Several embassy officials, including the Ambassador, met with Bishop Bertin of the Catholic Church and Caritas officials to discuss their ecumenical and humanitarian work in the region.

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