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July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Chad

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
September 13, 2011

[Covers six-month period from 1 July 2010 to 31 December 2010 (USDOS is shifting to a calendar year reporting period)]

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. However, the government continued to monitor the activities of fundamentalist Islamic groups. The government believed this action was necessary to ensure religious tolerance and secularism.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. However, the government continued to restrict some religious organizations and practices, so they would not infringe on the rights of others, and to safeguard public order and good morale. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There was occasional tension between Christians and Muslims as well as between fundamentalist and moderate Muslims. Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom. Religious leaders continued to reinforce peaceful links between moderate Muslim and Christian groups as a way to move past the instability of past years.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 495,755 square miles and a population estimated in the 2009 census to be 11.2 million.

More than half of the population is Muslim, approximately one-third is Christian, and the remainder follows indigenous religious beliefs or has no religion. Most northerners practice Islam, and most southerners practice Christianity or indigenous religions. Population patterns are becoming more complex, especially in urban areas, and there has been a proliferation of mosques in the traditionally Christian south.

The majority of Muslims adhere to the Sufi Tijaniyah tradition. A minority of Muslims (5 to 10 percent) hold more fundamentalist beliefs, which in some cases are associated with Wahhabism or Salafism.

Roman Catholics represent the largest Christian group. Most Protestants affiliate with various evangelical Christian groups. Small Bahai and Jehovah's Witnesses communities also are present.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections; however, the government bans certain Muslim groups and indirectly monitors Islamic activities through the High Council for Islamic Affairs (HCIA), an independent religious organization.

The constitution provides that the country shall be a secular state; however, some policies favor Islam in practice.

A committee composed of members of the HCIA and the Directorate of Religious and Traditional Affairs in the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) organized trips to Mecca for the Hajj (pilgrimage during Dhu'l-Hijjah, the 12th month of the Islamic calendar) and Umrah (pilgrimage).

The director of religious and traditional affairs oversees religious matters. Working under the MOI, the director is responsible for arbitrating intercommunal conflicts, reporting on religious practices, and assuring religious freedom. The HCIA oversees Islamic religious activities, including the supervision of some Arabic language schools and higher institutions of learning, and the representation of the country in international Islamic meetings.

The HCIA, in coordination with the president, appoints the grand imam, a spiritual leader for Muslims, who oversees each region's high imam and serves as head of the council. In principle, although not consistently in practice, the grand imam has the authority to restrict proselytizing by Islamic groups, regulate the content of mosque sermons, and exert control over activities of Islamic charities.

Religious leaders are involved in managing the country's wealth. A representative of the religious community sits on the Revenue Management College, the body that oversees use of oil revenues. The seat rotates between Muslim and Christian leaders every four years. At the end of the reporting period, a Muslim religious leader held the seat.

The government required religious groups, except indigenous groups but including foreign missionary groups, to register with the MOI. Registration took place without discrimination, and the government interpreted this recognition as official. Despite popular perceptions to the contrary, registration does not confer tax preferences or other benefits on religious groups.

The government prohibits activity that "does not create conditions of cohabitation among the populations," in order to regulate groups who advocated actions that would heighten sectarian tensions.

The government prohibits religious instruction in public schools but permits all religious groups to operate private schools without restriction. Many Arabic-language Islamic culture schools were financed by foreign donors, including the governments of Egypt, Libya, and other countries; nongovernmental organizations; and individuals, particularly from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Turkey, Pakistan, and Kuwait.

The government closed certain Qur'anic schools that compelled children to beg for food and money. The government was collaborating with the HCIA and the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization on building two large Qur'anic schools in Karal and Koundoul to replace those that closed.

While most interfaith dialogue took place on a private, voluntary basis, the government was generally supportive of these initiatives. The president meets regularly with religious leaders, most recently discussing social matters and Arabic-language schools with the country's Catholic bishops.

Government officials, including the president, regularly acknowledged the value of harmonious relations among religious groups and celebrated the country's religious diversity.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Easter Monday, Eid al-Fitr, All Saints' Day, Eid al-Adha, and Christmas. It is common for Muslims and Christians to attend each other's festivities.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally enforced legal and policy restrictions selectively. During the reporting period, the government maintained the ban imposed almost six years ago on Al-Mountada Al-Islami, the World Association for Muslim Youth, the Mecca Al-Moukarrama Charitable Foundation, and Al-Haramain Charitable Foundation for promoting violence to further religious goals. The ban was not necessarily enforced, and evidence indicated that these organizations continued to operate. For example, for an iftar celebration during Ramadan in 2009, the World Association for Muslim Youth publicly hosted a dinner at a local hotel without causing any government reaction. This organization also maintained a publicly advertised office and continued to work with well-known individuals in both the governmental and private sectors.

The government also banned Al Faïd al-Djaria (also spelled Al Faydal Djaria), a Sufi group in the Kanem, Lake Chad, and Chari Baguirmi areas. The director of religious and traditional affairs, the HCIA, and certain ulama (Muslim religious authorities) objected to some of Al Faïd al-Djaria's customs, such as the incorporation of singing, dancing, and the intermixing of sexes during religious ceremonies, which they deem un-Islamic. However, the group carried out activities in the Chari Baguirmi region.

The government reportedly monitored some organizations, such as Ansar al-Sunna, which adhered to a more austere interpretation of Islam and received significant foreign funding.

The 2007 ban on all forms of street corner evangelism and preaching remained in effect; however, local organizations could apply for government permission to engage in such activities, and the government usually granted such permission.

A conflict of authority that erupted between the HCIA, headed by the grand imam, and the Union of Mosque Imams, a Wahhabist group expressing dissatisfaction with the tolerant and ecumenical approach of the HCIA, continued to generate tension.

While the government is legally obligated to treat all religious groups or denominations equally, some non-Muslims alleged that Muslims received preferential status, particularly concerning use of public lands for building places of worship. On October 14, a local private newspaper editorialized that the government made development decisions based on where it would be favorable to Muslims. The government responded by threatening sanctions against the newspaper for risking what it termed "civil conflict" as a result of such allegations. No further action was taken by either side.

On November 16, the president banned the practice of "Khouroudj," a form of religious retreat with fundamentalist overtones, claiming that he did not want government officials disappearing into the countryside for weeks at a time "to study Islam."

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country, including religious prisoners and detainees.

The government continued to detain Sheikh Ahmet Ismael Bichara following a 2008 confrontation in Kuono between security forces and Bichara's supporters that left 72 persons dead. Unconfirmed information indicated that police might have transferred

Bichara to Koro Toro prison, where those with rebel sympathies are in some cases detained. The government regarded the detention as justified under its prohibition of activity that "does not create conditions of cohabitation among the populations."

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There was occasional tension between Christians and Muslims as well as between fundamentalist and moderate Muslims. While churches and mosques are intermixed in the more diverse southern region, Christians, who have a much smaller presence in the predominantly Muslim north, reported difficulties in establishing churches when and where they choose. Christian religious leaders viewed the difficulties from a cultural perspective and not a result of any formal policy, noting that when churches or houses of Christian worship are established in the north, they are sometimes relegated to the edges of the community or outside of the town.

Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom during the reporting period and were developing action plans to replicate formal interreligious dialogue and peaceful cohabitation at the local level.

Religious groups met regularly among themselves and with the president to resolve sources of tension and promote greater collaboration. During these encounters leaders discussed issues of peaceful cohabitation, tolerance, and respect for religious freedom.

There continued to be reports of tension within the Muslim community between leaders of the HCIA and more fundamentalist groups regarding interpretations of practices, preaching, and the leading of prayers.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The embassy continued a wide variety of outreach programs with the grand imam, HCIA, and Catholic and Protestant leaders to promote tolerance and mutual understanding.
