

2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Mali

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Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. With support from international forces, the government reclaimed control of its northern regions, which had experienced serious abuses by northern armed groups and foreign extremists. While northern armed groups remained marginally active in northern Mali as the disarmament and peace process unfolded, the government and UN presence prevented those groups from imposing extreme interpretations of religious law.

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

U.S. embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government, human rights organizations, and religious leaders. In meetings and U.S. embassy events throughout the year, the Ambassador and high-level U.S. delegations encouraged religious leaders to play a constructive role in the reconciliation process and countering violent extremism.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is 16 million (July 2013 estimate). Muslims constitute an estimated 95 percent of the population. Nearly all Muslims are Sunni and most follow Sufism. The population is 2 percent Christian, of whom approximately two-thirds are Roman Catholic and one-third Protestant. The remaining 3 percent adheres to indigenous religious beliefs or professes no religious affiliation. Groups adhering to indigenous religious beliefs reside throughout the country, but are most active in rural areas. Many Muslims and Christians also adhere to some aspects of indigenous beliefs.

There are several mosques associated with the group Dawa al Tabligh, a fundamentalist Muslim group. The group has fewer than a thousand members in Bamako.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally 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.

Passports and national identity documents do not designate religious identity.

The government requires registration of all public associations, including religious groups; however, registration confers no tax preference or other legal benefits and there is no penalty for failure to register. The registration process is routine. The government does not require groups practicing indigenous religions to register.

The Malian High Council of Islam (HCIM), an umbrella organization representing all significant Muslim groups, serves as the main liaison between the government and these groups. Before making important decisions on potentially controversial national issues, the government's policy is to consult with the HCIM and the Committee of Wise Men, a group including the Catholic Archbishop of Bamako, Protestant leadership, and other Muslim leaders. A junior minister of religious affairs serving within the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Local Government (MATCL) is responsible for promoting religious tolerance and coordinating national religious activities such as pilgrimages and religious holidays.

The MATCL has the authority, not exercised during the year, to prohibit religious publications that "defame" another religion.

Public schools do not offer religious instruction. There are a number of private, parochial, and other religious educational institutions, both Muslim and Christian. Madrassahs are community-run, private, Muslim religious schools teaching basic subjects, such as reading, writing, math, science, and history, in addition to Arabic and the Quran. There are 116 Catholic schools and a very small number of Protestant schools.

Government Practices

Early in the year the government cancelled a scheduled Dawa al Tabligh international conference in Bamako due to security concerns. This cancellation occurred during the country's declared state of emergency that banned all large gatherings.

In January the government, in coalition with French intervention forces, reclaimed control over the north, where violent extremists had enforced harsh interpretations of sharia (Islamic law), including executions, amputations, and floggings. The government began to investigate these incidents and arrested over 200 individuals. At year's end these investigations continued.

While the northern armed groups remained marginally active, Malian, French and UN forces prevented terrorist groups such as Ansar al-Dine and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa from further imposing extreme interpretations of sharia law on the population. There were, however, no governmental or social restrictions limiting preaching of strict interpretations of sharia. During the year many of the Christians who fled the northern regions began to return, though returns among all religious communities were slow given the continued regional instability.

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

In February religious leaders from Muslim and non-Muslim faiths came together to condemn extremist interpretations of Islamic law.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with a wide range of religious leaders, human rights organizations, and government officials throughout the year.

During the July visit of the U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, days before presidential elections, the embassy hosted an iftar with religious leaders. Participants discussed religious tolerance and freedom as well as their role in reconciliation, peace-building, and promoting objective electoral participation.

In a July 18 meeting with a popular imam regarding elections, the U.S. Ambassador emphasized that religious leaders would be important to the post-electoral period, when followers would look to religious leaders to foster tolerance and national reconciliation.

On July 22, the U.S. Ambassador hosted an event for 13 religious leaders where she emphasized the need for religious leaders to support reconciliation, including through promoting religious tolerance. The event was organized around an embassy-sponsored July 20-23 visit of the Muslim chaplain from a U.S. university, who also attended a series of events where he delivered a message of tolerance and reconciliation, met with the president of the High Islamic Council of Mali and with leading associations for young Muslims, and delivered sermons at five mosques.

On October 7, the Ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss countering violent extremism. The leaders reiterated their commitment to playing a constructive role in national reconciliation.

During Ramadan embassy staff members delivered President Obama's Ramadan message of tolerance and religious freedom on a daily basis while providing customary donations of rice and sugar to four dozen mosques and Islamic associations throughout the country.
