

# 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Guinea

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Committee for Reconciliation and Development (CNRD), which came into power following a military coup d'état in 2021, promulgated a Transition Charter, which serves in lieu of a constitution. The charter states the country is a secular state and any act undermining the secular nature of the state or an individual's religious freedom is considered a "high crime" punishable by fines and imprisonment. The penal code provides for freedom of worship within limits defined by the law. The Transition Charter stipulates that two members of the country's legislative body, the National Transition Council, be religious community representatives.

The cabinet-level Secretariat General of Religious Affairs (SRA) issued weekly themes for inclusion in Friday sermons at mosques and Sunday sermons in churches. Although the SRA did not control sermons at every mosque and church, its inspectors continued to be present in every region and were responsible for ensuring that mosque and church sermons were consistent with SRA directives. In June, administrative authorities of the Labe region summoned 12 imams for leading the Eid al-Adha prayer a day later than the official date decreed by the SRA, interrogating them for more than seven hours. The imams were eventually freed following intervention from the Regional Islamic League and pledging to follow instructions from authorities in the future. Local human rights activist Mamadou Kaly Diallo criticized the authorities' actions in the media, noting that different Islamic groups follow different traditions and previous governments had not intervened in such a way. He called the authorities' actions a threat to social peace. During a visit to the Kankan region in February, the Minister of Justice and Human Rights defended a local Muslim cleric who conducted prayers in the local vernacular rather than Arabic, a stance that was opposed by senior religious leaders. In August, the SRA issued a circular letter requesting all nongovernmental organizations and religious associations to register with the regional inspections and prefectural Secretariats for Religious Affairs.

A long-running land dispute involving Susu Muslim villagers and the Catholic Saint-Jean monastery in Kendoumaya, Lower Guinea remained unresolved.

The Grand Imam of Labe emphasized the role of imams in keeping peace and unity in the Fouta region in the central part of the country, which he described as being tolerant and welcoming of all religions.

The U.S. embassy consistently encouraged the transitional government to foster and maintain a culture of religious tolerance. It also continued to stress the important role of religious leaders in maintaining social cohesion and preventing religiously motivated violent extremism. In January, the Ambassador met with the Grand Imam of Labe and with local imams and elders and discussed religious freedom and tolerance and the risks associated with violent extremism related to religion. In January, the embassy sponsored a program that focused on the fundamental right to practice one's religion, faith, or belief, and the pivotal role this right plays in guaranteeing peace and security for all individuals. The embassy regularly posted messages encouraging religious tolerance on its social media platforms during major religious holidays including Ramadan, Eid al-Adha (known locally as Tabaski), and Easter.

## Section I.

### Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 13.6 million (midyear 2023). According to the SRA, approximately 84 percent of the population is Muslim, 11 percent is Christian, and 5 percent adhere to indigenous religious or other beliefs. Much of the Muslim and Christian population incorporates indigenous rituals into their religious practices. Muslims are generally Maliki Sunni; Sufism is also present. Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and several evangelical groups. There is also a small Baha'i community in addition to small numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, and adherents of traditional Chinese religious beliefs among foreign residents.

Muslims constitute a majority in all four regions of the country. Christians are concentrated in large cities, including Conakry, in southern coastal areas, and in the eastern Forest Region. Adherents of indigenous religious beliefs are most prevalent in the Forest Region.

The Bahá'í community is primarily located in Conakry and the Forest Region, especially in the prefectures of N'Zerekore, Lola, and Gueckedou. Smaller communities exist in Coyah, Boke, Dubreka, and Labe.

## **Section II.**

### **Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

The 2021 Transition Charter states that the country is a secular state and that any act undermining its secular nature or an individual's religious freedom is to be considered a "high crime" punishable by fines and imprisonment. The penal code provides for freedom of worship "under the conditions and in the forms provided for by law." The penal code states that any individual who through assault or threats prevents one or more persons from practicing their religion is punishable by one to three months' imprisonment and a fine of 500,000 to one million Guinean francs (\$60 to \$120). The penal code also states that preventing, delaying, or interrupting religious practices in a place of worship by public disturbance is punishable by two to six months' imprisonment and a fine of 500,000 to one million francs (\$60 to \$120). In addition, the penal code states that any person who in any way desecrates a place of worship or objects of worship within the place of worship may be punished by six months to one year's imprisonment and a fine of 500,000 to one million francs (\$60 to \$120). Anyone who insults a religious leader in the function of his or her duties may be punished by six months to two years' imprisonment and a fine of 500,000 to one million francs (\$60 to \$120). If the individual also threatens, assaults, or injures the religious leader, the punishment is increased to two to five years' imprisonment, with the same fine.

In addition, the Transition Charter stipulates two religious community members serve as representatives on the 81-member National Transition Council, the country's legislative body.

The SRA must approve all religious groups. Groups must provide a written constitution and application to the SRA along with their address and a fee of 250,000 francs (\$30). The SRA then sends the documents to the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization for final approval and signature. Once approved, the group becomes officially recognized. Every six months, each registered religious group must present a report of its activities to the government. Registering with the government entitles religious groups to an exemption from the value-added tax (VAT) on imported shipments and makes them eligible for select energy subsidies.

Unregistered religious groups are not entitled to VAT exemptions and other benefits. By law, the government may shut down unregistered groups and expel their leaders. There is limited opportunity for legal appeal of these penalties.

Religious groups may not own radio or television stations.

The compulsory primary school curriculum does not include religious studies. Some parents send their children to Quranic schools (madrassahs), either in addition to primary school or as their primary form of education.

The imams and administrative staff of the principal mosque in Conakry and the principal mosques in the main cities of the country's four regions are government employees. These mosques are directly under the administration of the government. The government subsidizes both Muslim and Christian pilgrimages in accordance with the law.

The SRA appoints national directors to lead the Offices of Christian Affairs, Islamic Affairs, Pilgrimages, Places of Worship, Economic Affairs, the Endowment, and Inspector General, which all fall under the SRA. The SRA is charged with promoting good relations among religious groups and coordinates with other members of the informal Interreligious Council, which is composed of the SRA and representatives from the Islamic faith and the Catholic, Anglican, and other Protestant churches.

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

## **GOVERNMENT PRACTICES**

The SRA continued to issue guidance outlining themes for discussion during Friday sermons at mosques and Sunday sermons in churches. The stated purpose of the weekly guidance was to harmonize religious views to prevent radical or political messages in sermons. Although the SRA did not monitor sermons at every mosque and church, its inspectors continue to be present in every region and were responsible for ensuring that mosque and church sermons were consistent with SRA directives.

On June 30, the administrative authorities of the Labe Region in the central part of the country summoned a group of 12 imams for leading the Eid al-Adha prayer on June 29 instead of the official date set by the SRA of June 28. Officers of the Judicial Police of the gendarmerie interrogated the imams for more than seven hours, which they said was to determine the reasons that led them to disobey the SRA instructions. The Governor of Labe, Colonel Robert Soumah, accompanied by the prefects of Labe and Lelouma Regions, stated that they had received instructions from whom they initially referred to as "higher authorities" to summon the imams and transport them to Conakry. The Grand Imam cited "a lack of information" as the reason for imams of leading the prayers on the earlier date. Following intervention by the regional Islamic League, imams received verbal warnings, and the decision to send them to the capital was reversed. According to media outlets, Transition President Mamady Doumbouya reportedly made a call to ask the governor to settle the matter in Labe. The Grand Imam publicly apologized on behalf of the imams and expressed gratitude to the Governor and expressed the imams' commitments to following instructions from authorities in the future. Following this summons, on July 28, Governor of Labe Soumah visited the locality of Koula Mawde, where he met with imams, religious leaders, dignitaries and numerous Muslim followers from different localities. During the meeting, Soumah acknowledged the importance of religious leaders in promoting and consolidating peace and national unity. He also reiterated the commitment of the transitional authorities to support and accompany Islamic leaders in fulfilling this mission.

Sources stated that the summoning of religious leaders in Labe raised significant concerns about religious freedom. Human rights activist Mamadou Kaly Diallo strongly criticized the regional authorities in the media and emphasized that some Islamic groups practiced a peaceful form of Islam based on the lunar calendar, differing from the Gregorian calendar. He said these practices were common and religious leaders had never been summoned by previous governments for defying orders from the state. He stated actions by the authorities were a threat to social peace and in contradiction with the principles of secularism and the fundamental rights defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Diallo further stated that it was essential to ensure

religious freedom in accordance with international standards, and urged the authorities to avoid actions that could incite religious conflicts.

There was little information on how the SRA would implement its December 2022 order governing the regulation, allocation, and operation of decentralized religious institutions, including regional inspections and the creation of prefectural and sub-prefectural secretariats for mosques, Quranic schools, and religious NGOs.

A “peace caravan” initiated in December 2022 by the SRA carried out activities throughout the country during the year aimed at raising awareness among imams about their roles and responsibilities in maintaining peace during the transitional period following the September 2021 coup d’état. The caravan, composed of SRA representatives, organized meetings to gather information on religious issues and address any local concerns. The SRA reported that the caravan successfully resolved conflicts related to the replacement of certain prefectural religious leaders, such as the prefectural secretary-general of religious affairs of Beyla in the Forest Region, which had been a lingering conflict for several months.

In Bintimodia, a locality within the Boke region, the SRA replaced the new sub-prefectural secretary to resolve a community conflict arising from the succession to the position following the previous secretary’s death.

During a visit to the Kankan region in Upper Guinea on February 1, Minister of Justice and Human Rights Charles Alphonse Wright engaged in a discussion with Elhadj Karamo Bangaly Kaba, the Grand Imam of Kankan, about Ismael Nanfo Diaby, a renowned Islamic preacher who prays in the Maninka local language. According to the Grand Imam, Diaby’s continued use of the vernacular rather than Arabic was a source of controversy and division throughout the region and the entire country, since the majority of the Muslim community believes that it is against the principles of Islam. He stated that in addition to praying in the local language, Nanfo disrupted public order despite a 2021 Supreme Court decision that rejected Diaby’s request to suspend the ban on his religious activities. The Grand Imam cited incidents that occurred in Norassoba in the neighboring prefecture of Siguiri between Diaby’s supporters and opponents that had the potential to turn violent. He also mentioned that some followers of Diaby, including the renowned Malian singer Tiken Jah Fakoly, had expressed their intention to pray with Diaby in Kankan, which the Grand Imam said could trigger further confrontations between Muslim followers opposed to Diaby’s practice of praying in the vernacular and those opposed.

In response to the concerns of the Grand Imam, Minister of Justice and Human Rights Wright stated that Diaby was free to pray as he wished, and others should not judge him. He emphasized that, as the Minister, he had an obligation to respect everyone’s beliefs, but also stated that any activity disrupting public order would face consequences. The Minister highlighted the importance of religious tolerance, noting that there were animists in Upper Guinea and others with no religious beliefs and their beliefs or lack of belief should be respected. He also stressed that forcing someone to convert to Islam would be a serious violation of human rights.

Various Muslim leaders voiced their anger at the Minister’s position. On February 2, imams, muezzins, and other Muslim religious leaders gathered at the headquarters of the Islamic League in the urban commune of Kankan to express their disapproval of the Minister’s stance, calling his remarks inappropriate.

The Grand Imam of Conakry also publicly voiced his disapproval of the Minister’s stance, stating that Muslim religious leaders would not tolerate any violations of Islamic laws. He said the Minister should refrain from involvement in religious matters, including expressing an opinion on how to practice Islam.

In August, the SRA issued a circular letter requesting all nongovernmental organizations and religious associations to register with the regional inspections and prefectural Secretariats for Religious Affairs, and in the Special Zone of Conakry with the Municipal Secretariats, from August 21 to November 20. The stated objective of this initiative was to compile a list of all NGOs and

religious associations operating within the national territory for better collaboration with the government.

According to the Assistant to the Secretary of the Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly, the Baha'i community refrained from engaging in political debates and consistently followed government directives, in line with the Baha'i principle of loyalty to authorities.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that their registration renewal application, which had been delayed in 2022, was approved during the year.

The government sponsored the travel of 10,344 Muslims on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, and the travel of approximately 193 Christians, including 142 Catholics and 51 evangelical Christians, on pilgrimage travel to Israel and nearby areas. The subsidies totaled 30 billion francs (\$3.5 million) for Muslim travel and approximately 2.4 billion francs (\$282,000) for Christian travel.

During the closing ceremony of the national Catholic pilgrimage in Boffa, which was attended by several dignitaries and government officials, the Secretary-General for Religious Affairs, Elhadj Karamoko Diawara, delivered a message of tolerance and religious acceptance. Nearly 25,000 persons from throughout the country took part in the pilgrimage, which took place from April 30 to May 7.

Islamic schools continued to be prevalent throughout the country and remained the traditional forum for religious education. Some Islamic schools were wholly private, while others received local government support. Islamic schools, particularly common in the Fouta Djallon highland area, taught the compulsory government curriculum, along with additional Quranic studies. Private Christian schools in Conakry and other large cities continued to accept students of all religious groups. These schools taught the compulsory curriculum without government support and held voluntary Christian prayers before school.

Many Muslim students not enrolled in private Islamic schools continued to receive religious education at madrassahs, some of which were associated with mosques and others supported by local communities. Unlike Islamic schools, the madrassahs did not teach the compulsory primary school curriculum. The government did not mandate registration for traditional religious Quranic centers, which focus on basic teaching of the Quran, but sources stated that if they became more formalized educational institutions, registration could be required. The madrassahs focused on Quranic studies, and instruction was in Arabic rather than the French used in most other schools. Funds from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Gulf states supported some madrassahs. Some SRA officials expressed concern about the lack of oversight of madrassahs and Quranic centers and said they were in the process of identifying them and possibly regulating them. Most students in madrassahs also attended part-time public or private schools that taught the compulsory curriculum.

The government continued to allocate free broadcast time on state-owned national television for Islamic and Christian programming, including Islamic religious instruction, Friday prayers, and church services. The government permitted religious broadcasting on privately owned commercial radio and encouraged equal time for Christian and Muslim groups.

### **Section III.**

## **Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

The case of animist residents of Kolakpata who reportedly attacked an evangelical Christian church and the homes of its pastor and members in January 2022 remained pending before the court of N'Zerekore as of November. According to local media, the residents were upset that the church would not permit the animists' end-of-year celebration rituals.

As of year's end, a long-running land dispute involving Susu Muslim villagers and the Catholic Saint-Jean monastery in Kendoumaya, Lower Guinea remained unresolved. The two sides continued to negotiate under instructions from the Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralization to the Governor of the region to maintain dialogue until the conflict was resolved.

The Grand Imam of Labe, an influential figure in the Fouta region in the central part of the country, emphasized the role of imams in keeping peace and unity in the region. He described this area as being tolerant and welcoming of all religions. The Grand Imam recounted what he stated was the enduring friendship between his late father, who preceded him as Grand Imam, and Cardinal Robert Sarah, a renowned Catholic leader both within the country and in his former role as prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship at the Vatican.

According to the head of the local Radio Espace Fouta station based in the Labe Middle Guinea region, relations between the majority Tijaniyya branch of Islam in the region and the minority Wahhabis remained difficult. He said there was pressure from some senior Muslim leaders to prevent Wahhabi imams and followers from gaining access to the local media. He also noted that Wahhabi mosques continued to face difficulties and were not authorized to hold Friday prayers by religious authorities.

In parts of the country, especially the middle and upper regions, particularly strong familial, communal, cultural, social, or economic pressure continued to discourage conversion from Islam, according to observers. Sources stated that interfaith marriages, particularly between Muslim women and Christian men or men of other religious faiths, are often subject to the condition that the men convert to Islam to gain approval from the families of the women.

## **Section IV.**

### **U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The U.S. embassy consistently encouraged the transitional government to foster and maintain a culture of religious tolerance. It also continued to stress the important role of religious leaders in maintaining social cohesion and preventing religiously motivated violent extremism.

On January 23, during a visit to Middle Guinea, the Ambassador met with the Grand Imam of Labe, who was accompanied by local imams and elders. The discussions primarily centered on topics such as religious freedom, tolerance, and the risks associated with violent extremism related to religion in the region.

The Ambassador also met in August with the Grand Imam of Conakry to discuss religious tolerance, reconciliation and social cohesion.

Embassy staff members met with a range of religious representatives, including individuals from the Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'i communities.

The Ambassador hosted an iftar on April 5, bringing together a range of Muslim leaders in the capital.

In January, the embassy sponsored a program that focused on religious freedom in which participants watched a documentary that highlighted various religious practices and faiths, followed by a discussion on religious freedom and tolerance. Among topics discussed were the fundamental right to practice one's religion, faith, or belief, and the pivotal role this right plays in guaranteeing peace and security for all individuals. Participants also discussed the imperative of living without the fear of oppression due to one's religious beliefs. A principal aim of the program was for the participants to raise awareness in their communities about the importance of religious freedom and tolerance.

The embassy regularly posted messages on its social media platforms on major religious holidays, including Ramadan, Eid al-Adha, and Easter to encourage religious tolerance.