

USDOS – US Department of State

2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Chad

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes the state as secular and affirms the separation of religion and state. It provides for freedom of religion and equality before the law without distinction as to religion. It prohibits “denominational propaganda” that inhibits national unity. The government maintained its ban on the leading Wahhabi association, but media said enforcement of the ban remained difficult and that Wahhabis continued to meet and worship in their own mosques. Arabic-language local media said one reason Wahhabi groups continued their activities was that a number of government and security officials come from the same region or tribe as the Wahhabi leaders. Between March and June, the government closed all places of gathering, including places of worship, to fight the spread of COVID-19. National Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic leaders publicly supported the government restrictions and encouraged believers to pray at home. Media reported that Wahhabis did not support or comply with government restrictions and said they continued communal prayers in the northern and northeastern neighborhoods of N’Djamena. On December 14, President Idriss Deby signed into law an amendment to the constitution that eliminated a denominational oath for high-ranking government servants instituted in 2018. The government frequently denounced as dangerous to national unity all forms of “communalism” – allegiance to a specific group or community rather than to wider society – without specifying religious, ethnic, or other dividing lines.

A National Day of Prayer for Peace, Peaceful Cohabitation, and National Concord was held on November 28 that brought together Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim religious leaders, many of whom made statements calling for unity and peaceful coexistence. Analysts said the country remained relatively free from significant conflict between religious groups and from extremist movements, while also noting that the divisive legacy of the largely southern and Christian rule of the country between 1960 and 1979 lingered and, together with widespread poverty, increased the risk of radicalization along identity lines. During an interfaith meeting in August, some Muslim leaders said Wahhabism was growing in the country.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the embassy expanded virtual engagement on religious freedom and tolerance. In lieu of hosting an annual iftar, the Charge d’Affaires spoke by telephone with the president of the High Council for Islamic Affairs (HCIA) at the beginning of Ramadan to discuss religious freedom and tolerance in the country. The Charge d’Affaires also recorded a video message for Eid al-Adha. During the August visit of the U.S. Special Envoy for the Sahel Region of Africa, the embassy organized a roundtable discussion to support interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.9 million (July 2020 estimate). According to a 2014-2015 census estimate, 52.1 percent of the population is Muslim, 23.9 percent Protestant, 20 percent Roman Catholic, 0.3 percent animist, 0.2 percent other Christian, 2.8 percent no religion, and 0.7 percent unspecified. Most Muslims adhere to the Sufi Tijaniyah tradition. A small minority hold beliefs associated with Wahhabism, Salafism, or follow the political-religious doctrine espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood. Most Protestants are evangelical Christians. There are small numbers of Baha’is and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Most northerners practice Islam, and most southerners practice Christianity or indigenous religions. There is a significant Muslim presence in the south but minimal Christian presence in the north. Religious distribution is mixed in urban areas, and indigenous religions are often practiced to some degree along with Islam and Christianity.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes the state as secular and affirms the separation of religion and state. The constitution provides for freedom of religion and equality before the law without distinction as to religion. These rights may be regulated by law and may be limited by law only to ensure mutual respect for the rights of others and for the “imperative” of safeguarding public order and good morals. It prohibits “denominational propaganda” that infringes on national unity or the secular nature of the state.

In December, the government adopted constitutional amendments that removed a denominational oath of office that had required government directors and secretaries general and above to take an oath “under God” or “under Allah.”

Under the law, all associations, religious or otherwise, must register with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralized Territorial Collectivities. Associations must provide a list of all the founding members and their positions in the organization, founders’ resumes, copies of the founders’ identification cards, minutes of the establishment meetings, a letter to the minister requesting registration, principal source of the organization’s revenue, address of the organization, a copy of its rules and procedures, and statutory documents of the organization. The ministry conducts background checks on every founding member and establishes a six-month temporary, but renewable, authorization to operate, pending final authorization and approval. Failure to register with the ministry means that organizations are not considered legal entities and may not open bank accounts or enter into contracts; it may also lead to the banning of a group. Group founders or board members may be subject to one month to one year in prison and a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 CFA francs (\$94 to \$940) for failure to register. Registration does not confer tax preferences or other benefits.

Burqas, defined by ministerial notice as any garment where one sees only the eyes, are forbidden by ministerial decree. The ministerial notice also applies to *niqabs*, although this reportedly is not enforced.

The constitution states public education shall be secular. The government prohibits religious instruction in public schools but permits religious groups to operate private schools, and there are numerous schools operated by Muslims, Catholics, and Protestants.

The HCIA, an independent government body, oversees Islamic religious activities, including some Arabic-language schools and institutions of higher learning, and represents the country’s Muslim community at international Islamic forums. The government approves those nominated by members of the HCIA to serve on the council. Wahhabis are nominated to serve on the council but have not participated due to their stated concerns regarding the council’s role in the government ban on their activities. Muslim Brotherhood adherents are also represented on the council, operating under the umbrella of Sufi groups rather than as overt representatives of Muslim Brotherhood groups. The Grand Imam of N’Djamena, who is selected by a committee of Muslim elders and approved by the government, is the de jure president of the HCIA and oversees the heads of the HCIA branches and grand imams from each of the country’s 23 regions. He has the authority to restrict Muslim groups from proselytizing, regulate the content of mosque sermons, and control activities of Islamic charities. In practice, he does not regulate sermons.

The Office of the Director of Religious and Traditional Affairs under the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralized Territorial Collectivities oversees religious matters. The office is responsible for mediating intercommunal conflict, reporting on religious practices, and ensuring religious freedom. It also reports concerns and suggestions regarding religious activities to the Minister of Territorial Administration, who has the authority to ban or sanction activities. The position of office director rotates every two years among Muslims, Protestants, and Catholics. The office contains a special bureau for Hajj and Umrah under the supervision of the Presidency of the Republic, with members chosen annually by presidential decree. The HCIA deals directly with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralized Territorial Collectivities or with the civil office of the President of the Republic to address concerns with Wahhabi groups.

The constitution states military service is obligatory, and it prohibits invoking religious belief to “avoid an obligation dictated by the national interest.” This statute largely applies in case of wartime mobilization, since the country does not have universal military conscription.

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

Government Practices

The government maintained its ban on the leading Wahhabi group, Ansar al-Sunna. According to civil rights organizations, enforcement was difficult, and adherents continued to meet and worship in their own mosques. Local media reported that many security force officials belonged to the same tribes and came from the same regions as the Wahhabi leaders, resulting in lax implementation of government decisions, favoritism, and bribery. Local Arabic-language media reported that the HCIA

president reconciled with Wahhabi groups, unlike his predecessor, who was generally anti-Wahhabist. Due to the government ban on their activities, Wahhabis received financial support from abroad as individuals rather than as a group, according to local Arabic-language media.

The government continued to deploy security forces around both Islamic and Christian places of worship, in particular on Fridays around mosques and Sundays around churches, as well as on other occasions for religious events.

Between March and June, the government closed all gathering places, including places of worship, to fight the spread of COVID-19. The measures applied to all religious groups in the same manner, and national Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic leaders all supported these government restrictions in public statements and encouraged believers to pray at home. Local media reported that Wahhabis did not support or comply with governmental restrictions, especially in the northern and northeastern neighborhoods of N'Djamena. The government lifted restrictions on public communal worship in June and promoted social distancing measures. Mosques and Protestant churches reopened in June, while Catholic churches chose to delay their reopening until July, citing COVID-19 transmission concerns.

According to media, the government's elimination in December of the denominational oath of office that had required senior government officials to take an oath "under God" or "under Allah" was widely popular.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Analysts stated the country, which comprises a diverse society with many tribal, ethnic, and religious identities, remained relatively free from significant conflict between religious groups and from extremist movements. They added that the divisive legacy of the largely southern and Christian rule of the country between 1960 and 1979 lingered and, together with widespread poverty, increased the risk of radicalization along identity lines. Arabic-language media said N'Djamena and other large cities self-segregated according to religious divisions.

Analysts said poverty and a lack of government services raised the risks that violent extremism, including extremism related to religion, would spread to the country, especially in the Lake Chad region, where Boko Haram and ISIS West Africa launched attacks against government soldiers and unarmed civilians during the year.

Religious leaders continued to raise awareness of the risks of terrorist attacks, which continued throughout the year, particularly in Lac Province, and to advocate for continued additional security in places of worship. There were no reports of terrorist attacks against places of worship, although police continued to provide security during ceremonies.

In line with government restrictions, media coverage did not mention instances of religious tension or conflict, instead using the term "communalism" – allegiance to a specific group or community rather than to wider society – to refer in general to divisions among various groups or communities, whether based on geographic, ethnic, religious, or other loyalties. Media reported religious tensions existed in instances of farmer-herder violence, with Christian groups refusing to accept *diya*, or financial compensation paid to victims of violence.

At an interfaith roundtable discussion in August, a representative of the HCIA said Wahhabism was spreading quickly in the country and the government could not stop the growth. Representatives of the Catholic and Protestant Churches said there were contentious social-religious problems between Muslims and Christians that were difficult to resolve, especially forced conversion from Christianity to Islam upon marriage. Religious leaders said violence targeting religious groups, such as mosque attacks and church vandalism, consisted of isolated incidents perpetrated by individuals and were not based on extreme ideology or backed by any particular religious group.

The Regional Forum on Interfaith Dialogue, comprising representatives of evangelical Protestant churches, the Catholic Church, and the Islamic community, met regularly. In November, on National Prayer Day, it publicly reiterated its commitment to educating its respective groups on the necessity of peaceful coexistence.

Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim religious leaders participated in a National Day of Prayer for Peace, Peaceful Cohabitation and National Concord on November 28. Protestant leader Pastor Batein Kaligue said individuals should "favor the spirit of solidarity, communion, and fraternity for national peace." Catholic leader Bishop Edmond Djitangar Gotbe said, "God does not answer our prayers, he does not accept our sacrifices, when our hearts are filled with resentment and hatred towards one another." The president of the HCIA publicly condemned all forms of terrorism and stated, "Barbaric terrorist acts contradict all divine religions." President Deby emphasized the consolidation of peace

and national unity, stating, “Every Chadian must be fully aware of the imperative to consolidate national unity. Let us be more united; let us transcend all selfishness and all considerations related to divisions of all kinds.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d’Affaires met with Ministry of Territorial Administration officials and discussed shared support for maintaining dialogue and peaceful coexistence among the country’s religiously diverse population.

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy representatives met and spoke with the Grand Imam of N’Djamena and with Catholic, Protestant, and Baha’i leaders to monitor and promote religious freedom and tolerance as well as to discuss efforts to counter extremist messages related to religion.

During the August visit of U.S. Special Envoy for the Sahel Region of Africa, the embassy organized a roundtable discussion with Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and Baha’i leaders to support interfaith dialogue and cooperation as well as to discuss efforts to counter extremist messages related to religion.

Embassy officials continued to discuss religious tolerance with imams during meetings and in training sessions and workshops. The embassy increased social media outreach on religious freedom, including a popular video message recognizing Eid al-Adha featuring the Charge d’Affaires. The embassy highlighted activities related to, and amplified messages promoting, religious freedom and tolerance.

In January, the embassy organized two presentations in French and Arabic on religious tolerance and human rights. The audience included government officials, religious leaders, teachers, university students, lawyers, judges, civil society, and media.

In September, the embassy hosted a Meeting on Education, Respect, Resilience, and Inclusion for 15 religious leaders and high-level officials in the education sector, including the Minister of Education. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom hosted the virtual meeting, which was held in French and Arabic.

ecoi.net summary:

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