

NIGER

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were no reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials regularly emphasized the importance of religious tolerance in public statements, in visiting scholar and speaker programs, and in meetings with government officials, religious leaders, and members of civil society.

Section I. Religious Demography

More than 98 percent of the population practices Islam. Approximately 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni and 5 percent are Shia. There are also small communities of Christians and Baha'is. Christians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, account for less than 2 percent of the population and are mainly in the regions of Maradi, Dogondoutchi, and Niamey, as well as other urban centers with foreign resident populations. Numbering a few thousand, Baha'is reside primarily in Niamey and in communities on the west side of the Niger River. A very small percentage of the population is reported to practice indigenous religious beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution provides for the separation of religion and state. The law states that each person shall have the right to freedom of thought, opinion, expression, conscience, religion, and belief. The state shall guarantee the free exercise of religion and expression of beliefs.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Maulid al-Nabi (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), Easter Monday, Eid al-Fitr, Lailat al-Qadr, Eid al-Adha, Muharram, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country.

The Ministry of Interior, Public Security, Decentralization, and Religious Affairs promoted interfaith dialogue and elicited religious viewpoints on government policies and programs. For example, the government supported an international seminar on Islamic preaching principles and gender equality in an Islamic context as well as projects to introduce vocational training and foreign languages in Qur'anic schools.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In general, societal respect for religious freedom was characterized by strong support for both government- and nongovernmental organization (NGO)-sponsored events supporting tolerance, non-discrimination, and dialogue.

There was one report of religious-based tension during the year. On November 11, a group of Muslim women protested against Christian evangelistic activity organized by a foreign preacher. On November 16, a group of Muslim men led a similar protest and issued a statement calling on the government to ban the campaign. However, the government ensured that the Christian program took place without incident from November 16-20.

On October 12, the Islamic Council of Niger focused its ordinary session on the need to fight negative and dangerous behaviors, including intolerance. The Council is a federation of Islamic organizations that represents the Islamic community in its dealings with the government and makes consensual decisions on issues such as dates of holiday observances.

In September a local NGO in partnership with the Islamic-Christian Relations Commission held an awareness-raising and training session on interfaith dialogue for 30 journalists. Topics included the Islamic and Christian theological tenets of

interfaith dialogue and their role in promoting peace and tolerance between the two communities. Various Christian and Muslim leaders made presentations.

On January 19, the Alliance of Christians and Muslims for the Fight against AIDS organized a series of conferences in various schools in order to educate the academic community on religious texts against stigmatization and all forms of discrimination, including but not limited to discrimination of people living with HIV/AIDS.

It was common for Muslims and Christians to attend one another's festivities during these holidays.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government continued to support religious freedom and tolerance in the country as part of its overall policy on human rights. During the year, the embassy organized two conferences on "Peace, Tolerance, and Solidarity" featuring alumni from a U.S.-sponsored exchange program who spoke about American religious tolerance, solidarity through community service, and the overlap of these with Qur'anic teachings.

The U.S. embassy also hosted three iftar dinners during Ramadan that included statements on religious tolerance and sent two individuals to the United States on a religious tolerance program for international visitors. Embassy officials met with community leaders in the religious center of Kiota, invited the leadership of the National Islamic Association to a roundtable on women's rights, funded a grant to the Islamic Students Association at the University of Niamey for a computer lab "open to students of all faiths," and supported the work of faith-based hospitals and orphanages through visits and donations.

A U.S. Agency for International Development program continued to fund an interreligious council composed of Muslim and Christian leaders in the Maradi region that has successfully mediated disputes stemming from perceived religious biases. Embassy personnel met periodically with the council to discuss religious tolerance and other issues facing the region.