

MALI 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and grants individuals freedom of religion in conformity with the law. The law criminalizes abuses against religious freedom. Terrorist groups used violence and launched attacks against civilians, security forces, peacekeepers, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam. A July 19 assault claimed by Ansar al-Dine on the military base in Nampala killed 17 soldiers and wounded 35. An attack in May by al-Mourabitoun killed four UN personnel. Although Ministry of Justice officials stated resources were inadequate, the government continued efforts to investigate abuses carried out by violent extremist groups.

Muslim religious leaders frequently condemned extremist interpretations of sharia and non-Muslim religious leaders frequently condemned religious extremism. Religious leaders, including Muslims and Catholics, spoke at an Eid al-Fitr ceremony in July hosted by President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, where they jointly called for peace among all faiths.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives conveyed messages of religious tolerance to government leaders in private and, along with civil society interlocutors, in speeches, at embassy-hosted interfaith events, and at other events. The U.S. embassy supported training programs to promote religious tolerance and counter violent extremist messaging, and discussed religious freedom with religious leaders, human rights organizations, and civil society throughout the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.5 million (July 2016 estimate). Muslims constitute an estimated 95 percent of the population. Nearly all Muslims are Sunni and most follow Sufism. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Christians, of whom approximately two-thirds are Roman Catholic and one-third Protestant, groups with indigenous religious beliefs, and those with no religious affiliation. Groups adhering to indigenous religious beliefs reside throughout the country, but are mostly present in rural areas. Many Muslims and Christians also adhere to some aspects of indigenous beliefs. There are fewer than 1,000 individuals in Bamako and an unknown number outside of the capital associated with the Muslim group Dawa al-Tabligh.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of religion in conformity with the law.

According to the penal code, any act of discrimination based on religion or any act impeding the freedom of religious observance or worship is punishable with up to five years of imprisonment or 10 years' banishment (prohibition from residing in the country). The penal code also states any religiously motivated persecution of a group of people constitutes a crime against humanity. There is no statute of limitations for such crimes, which may be tried in the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The law requires registration of all public associations, including religious groups, except for groups practicing indigenous religious beliefs; however, registration confers no tax preferences or other legal benefits and there is no penalty for failure to register. To register, applicants must submit copies of a declaration of intent to create an association, notarized copies of bylaws, copies of policies and regulations, notarized copies of a report of the first meeting of the association's general assembly, and lists of the names of the leaders of the association with signature samples of three of the leaders. Upon review, the Ministry of Territorial Administration grants the certificate of registration.

The constitution prohibits public schools from offering religious instruction but private schools may do so. Religious schools, which are privately funded and known locally as *medersas* (a variant of *madrassah*), teach religion, but are required to adhere to the standard government curriculum. Informal schools, known locally as Quranic schools, which some students attend in lieu of attending public schools, do not follow a government curriculum and offer exclusively religious instruction.

The law defines marriage as secular. Couples who seek legal recognition must have a civil ceremony, which they may follow with a religious ceremony. Under the law, a man may choose between a monogamous or polygamous marriage. The law states that the religious customs of the deceased determine inheritance rights. Civil courts consider these customs when they adjudicate such cases; however, many cases are settled informally.

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

Government Practices

The government collaborated with ICC investigators to prosecute individuals who committed crimes against the country's religious and cultural heritage. On September 27, Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, also known as Abu Tourab, was convicted by the ICC in The Hague and sentenced to nine years in prison for his involvement in the 2012 destruction of nine mausoleums and a mosque in Timbuktu. The case was part of an investigation the ICC launched in response to a July 2012 request by the local government.

At year's end, the investigation into the alleged crimes of Houka ag al-Housseiny had not been completed and the case had not yet gone to trial, reportedly due to challenges collecting sufficient evidence. Domestic and international security forces stated they suspected ag al-Housseiny of having acted as a judge for al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) during the group's occupation of Timbuktu, and of ordering floggings and amputations in that capacity. The government provisionally released him in August 2014. Similarly, authorities made no progress in the investigation into the crimes allegedly committed by Sidi Amarould Daha, also known as Yoro, whom domestic and international security forces stated they suspected of ordering floggings and amputations while leading the police force of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa during its 2012-2013 occupation of Gao. Authorities released Yoro in 2014 and as of the end of the year he had become a leading member of a government-aligned militia.

By year's end, the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission had not made substantial progress on its core functions or set up full-fledged operations on the ground. The commission stated it had established contact with victims of the country's armed conflict, in addition to presenting its mission and services to affected communities, including victims of religious persecution.

The minister of religious affairs and traditions was responsible for promoting religious tolerance and coordinating national religious activities such as pilgrimages and religious holidays for followers of all religions. In January the minister held a prayer ceremony for Muslims and Christians in Banico calling for peace and reconciliation among religious groups and unity among all residents. In July the minister spoke during a Catholic Mass at the national cathedral in the presence of the Archbishop of Bamako.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Throughout the country, violent armed groups including Ansar al-Dine and its affiliate Macina Liberation Front (MLF), AQIM, and al-Mourabitoun continued to carry out targeted attacks against security forces, UN peacekeepers, civilians, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam. Ansar al-Dine claimed responsibility for a July 19 attack on the military base in Nampala that killed 17 soldiers and wounded 35. On May 31, al-Mourabitoun attacked a UN peacekeeping base in Gao, killing one Chinese peacekeeper, two UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) employees, and a French national working with UNMAS. AQIM was suspected of having killed the son of the village chief of the town of Boni on February 8 after he reportedly refused to collaborate with extremist groups.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslim and non-Muslim religious leaders frequently and jointly condemned extremist interpretations of Islam.

In July Catholic and Muslim religious leaders spoke at the Eid al-Fitr ceremony hosted by President Keita and called for peace among the different faiths.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with government officials and highlighted the country's potential to use its history of religious tolerance to promote peace in the region. In particular, the embassy encouraged government officials to take steps to prosecute individuals arrested for crimes linked to extremist activities. Embassy officers spoke with a wide range of influential religious leaders and human rights organizations. Embassy officials called on their interlocutors to advocate for tolerance and peace among religions, and organized a number of activities to emphasize the importance of religious tolerance and freedom. A number of prominent religious leaders associated with the country's two chief Sufi and Salafist leaders participated in a U.S. government exchange programs to support themes related to religious diversity and tolerance.

Some of the U.S. embassy's most widely shared social media postings during the year included messages from the Ambassador on the occasions of Ramadan, Easter, Eid al-Fitr, and especially Eid al-Adha. These messages highlighted the

country's role as a leader in the Muslim world, with regard to promoting a culture of tolerance and respect for diversity.