

DJIBOUTI 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion, but mandates equality for all faiths. The government increased its authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including mosques' assets and personnel. It issued a decree executing a law on state control of mosques which converted imams into civil service employees and transferred mosque property and assets to the government. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs used the law to replace imams and close one mosque and temporarily detain several of its leaders as well as some worshippers. Following a terrorist attack involving a fully-veiled woman, the police temporarily banned fully-veiled women from entering government or commercial offices.

Norms and customs continued to discourage conversion from Islam. There were reports of physical abuse against converts to Christianity by members of the converts' communities and discrimination in employment and education against converts to Christianity.

U.S. embassy officials met with the Secretary General of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to discuss issues of religious freedom, including the closure of a prominent mosque and the transfer of control of mosques' assets and personnel to the state. The Ambassador and other embassy officials shared President Obama's Ramadan message on the importance of religious freedom in the United States and around the world with government and civil society leaders, including at an embassy-hosted iftar.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 810,000 (July 2014 estimate), of which 94 percent is Sunni Muslim. Roman Catholics, Protestants, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Jews, Bahais, and atheists constitute the remaining 6 percent. Individuals of these groups are generally foreign-born citizens and expatriates, highly concentrated in Djibouti City.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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Islam is the religion of the state, according to the constitution. The constitution mandates the government respect all faiths and guarantees equality before the law, regardless of one's religion. The law does not impose sanctions on those who do not observe Islamic teachings or who practice other religious beliefs. The constitution prohibits religious-based political parties.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including mosques, religious events, and private Islamic schools. There are approximately 40 private Islamic schools which are managed jointly by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the Ministry of Education. The public school system is secular.

Some civil service employees, such as inspectors and magistrates, are required to swear secular oaths. While there is no penalty established by law for noncompliance, it remains an official custom. The president swears an Islamic religious oath.

Muslims deal with matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance in family courts whose code includes elements of civil and Islamic law. Civil courts address the same matters for non-Muslims. In legal matters, citizens are officially considered Muslims if they do not specifically identify with another religious group.

The government requires all foreign and domestic non-Muslim religious groups to register by submitting an application to the Ministry of Interior, which conducts a lengthy background investigation of the group. Domestic and foreign Muslim religious groups must apply to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and are not subject to registration or investigation by the Ministry of Interior. Muslim and non-Muslim foreign religious groups must also gain approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Once approved, the group signs a five-year agreement detailing the scope of its activities. Groups may not operate in the interim while awaiting registration.

Government Practices

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs used the law regulating mosques to replace imams and temporarily close some mosques. Some imams reported being questioned by security services following sermons with strong political and social justice themes.

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In July the government issued a decree executing a law on state control of mosques which converted the status of imams into civil service employees under the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and transferred ownership of mosque properties and other assets to the government. The Secretary General of the Ministry of Religious Affairs stated the decree aims to eliminate political activity from mosques and provide greater government oversight of mosque assets and activities. Government officials also indicated the law was designed to counter perceived foreign influence in mosques. Implementation of the decree was ongoing at year's end.

In July the government closed the prominent al-Rahma mosque in Djibouti City and detained its imam for 48 hours. The mosque remained closed at year's end. The government also relieved the imam of his position as a civil service employee under the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. The Secretary General of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs said the government's actions were triggered by remarks the imam made during Friday prayers, which were critical of a police directive that banned fully-veiled women from entering commercial and government properties. The ban was implemented shortly after a fatal terrorist attack in Djibouti City involving a fully-veiled woman who used her veil as a method of concealment. Several human rights groups as well as opposition figures reported alleged police discrimination against women wearing hijabs following this directive. Police arrested other religious leaders of the al-Rahma mosque, when they subsequently led Friday prayers in an open-air lot adjacent to the closed mosque, and police detained over a dozen worshippers. Most worshippers were released within 48 hours, though four women in the group were detained for several additional days. Worshippers were forced to relocate to mosques in neighboring communities.

The government continued to permit non-Islamic groups registered with the government to operate freely, including Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches. Religious groups not independently registered with the government, such as Ethiopian Protestant and Muslim congregations, operated under the auspices of registered groups. Smaller groups that did not fit under the umbrella of the registered groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Bahais, were unregistered with the government, but operated privately without incident.

The government issued visas to foreign Islamic and non-Islamic clergy and missionaries, but required they belong to registered religious groups before they could work in the country or operate nongovernmental organizations.

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The government allowed non-Islamic religious groups to host events and encourage others to join their religion on the groups' private property; in practice, groups refrained from proselytizing in public spaces. The government permitted a limited number of Christian missionaries to sell religious books and pamphlets.

The government legally recognized Islamic marriages conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and civil marriages conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior. It did not recognize non-Islamic religious marriages.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Societal norms and customs discouraged conversion from Islam, but conversions still occurred. There were reports of physical abuse against converts to Christianity by members of the converts' communities. There were also reports of discrimination in employment and education against converts to Christianity who changed their names.

Some representatives of Christian denominations reported incidents of animosity by individuals, such as defacing of exterior church symbols or stoning of church property.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with the Secretary General of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to discuss issues of religious freedom, including the closure of al-Rahma mosque and the transfer of mosques' assets and personnel to government control. Embassy officials also met with Christian and Muslim leaders to discuss interfaith relations and issues of respect for religious freedom. The Ambassador shared President Obama's Ramadan message on the importance of religious freedom in the United States and around the world with government, religious, and civil society leaders, including at an embassy-hosted iftar.