

MALI 2014 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. The government investigated and arrested alleged perpetrators in several cases in which religious minorities were threatened or assaulted.

Terrorist groups espoused violence and launched attacks against civilians and peacekeeping forces. Though resources were inadequate, the government continued efforts to investigate abuses carried out by these groups in areas under the groups' control in 2012.

Religious leaders from Muslim and non-Muslim faiths frequently and jointly condemned extremist interpretations of Islamic law.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives publicly conveyed messages of religious tolerance, in speeches and other settings and at embassy-hosted inter-faith events, and supported training programs to counter violent extremist messaging. The embassy also discussed religious freedom with religious leaders, human rights organizations, and government officials throughout the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.5 million (July 2014 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 most 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

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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 of banned residency (prohibition from residing in the country).

Under the penal code, any religiously motivated persecution of a group of people constitutes a crime against humanity. The practical effect of this provision is there is no statute of limitations for such crimes and they may be tried in the International Criminal Court.

The law defines marriage as secular and does not recognize religious marriage. It states that the religious customs of the deceased determine inheritance rights.

Passports and national identity documents do not designate religious identity.

The law requires registration of all public associations, including religious groups, except for groups practicing indigenous religious beliefs; however, registration confers no tax preference or other legal benefits and there is no penalty for failure to register. In order to register, applicants must submit the following documents: two copies of a declaration of intent to create an association; two notarized copies of bylaws; two copies of policies and regulations; two notarized copies of a report of the first meeting of the association's general assembly; and two 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.

There is no visa restriction based on religious belief. Foreign missionaries regularly receive visas and are present throughout the country.

Public schools do not offer religious instruction.

Government Practices

The government continued to investigate incidents by violent extremists, who enforced harsh interpretations of sharia through executions, amputations, and floggings during the 2012 terrorist occupation of the north. By year's end, the

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government had arrested over 200 individuals in connection with these incidents but had not tried any high profile cases. Security conditions in the north also inhibited judicial investigations.

Citing insufficient evidence, on August 15, the government provisionally released, pending a trial or closure of the case, Houka Ag Alhousseiny, an alleged member of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Alhousseiny was suspected of ordering floggings and amputations during the occupation. At year's end, the investigation of his case was still ongoing.

On September 28, three men entered a Catholic church in Banakabougou in Bamako District and threatened individuals attending Mass. Local police arrested one of the alleged perpetrators. On September 30, prosecutors provisionally released the accused and charged him with inciting a crime of a religious nature. The case was scheduled to go to trial in criminal court in November, but was dismissed because the defendant was declared mentally unfit to stand trial.

In May youth reportedly threw stones at Christians in Niamakoro, in Bamako District. Authorities arrested three suspects on charges related to threats against religious freedom and assault. The prosecutor ordered the provisional release of the three pending a trial in criminal court, which was held in September. On November 10, all three were found guilty as charged and were sentenced to three months of probation with the penalty of three months' imprisonment for violation of probation.

Before making important decisions on potentially controversial national issues, for example the creation of the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission, the government consulted with the Malian High Council of Islam, a group representing all significant Islamic groups, and the Committee of Wise Men, a group including the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bamako and Protestant and Muslim leaders.

The minister of religious affairs and worship was responsible for promoting religious tolerance and coordinating national religious activities such as pilgrimages and religious holidays. The minister could prohibit religious publications that he judged to defame another religion but did not exercise this authority during the year.

Abuses by Rebels, Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

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Terrorist groups including Ansar al-Dine, AQIM, Al Mulathamun and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (the latter two announced they were merging to form a new group, Al Murabitoun), continued to espouse extremist ideologies and carry out targeted attacks against peacekeepers and civilians in the north. On October 6, Iyad Ag Ghaly, the leader of Ansar Al Dine and U.S.- and UN-designated terrorist, released public messages espousing violence in the name of Islam against international military forces and their supporters. Members of Al Murabitoun frequently claimed responsibility for suicide attacks occurring in the north against those whom they considered enemies of Islam, such as international military forces and civilian supporters.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders from Muslim and non-Muslim faiths frequently and jointly condemned extremist interpretations of Islam. For example, in August, prior to the resumption of peace talks in Algiers between the government and rebel groups, religious leaders, including Muslims, Protestants, and Catholics, condemned violent interpretations of Islamic law, jointly called for peace among all Malians, and organized national prayers for peace .

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 a wide range of religious leaders, human rights organizations, and government officials. Embassy officials called on their interlocutors to advocate for tolerance and peace among religions and among citizens

The embassy funded a three-day, skills-building program by the Union of Madrassah Teachers of Segou for civic education teachers at local madrassahs, beginning on September 9. The program trained more than 200 young leaders from throughout the country in peaceful conflict resolution. The embassy also conducted workshops on civic education for madrassah students and teachers in the cities of Kayes, Sikasso, and Segou.

On July 28, the U.S. Ambassador delivered a Ramadan message in which he called on religious leaders to support reconciliation and religious tolerance.

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The embassy hosted an iftar with religious leaders and other guests. Participants discussed religious tolerance and freedom as well as their role in reconciliation and peace building.

During Ramadan, embassy staff members delivered President Obama's Ramadan message of tolerance and religious freedom while providing customary donations of rice and sugar to four dozen mosques and Islamic associations throughout the country.

On February 19, the embassy organized an inter-religious dialogue conducted by the Muslim Association for Peace and Salvation, gathering religious leaders to discuss abuses by extremist groups during their occupation of two-thirds of the country's territory. Several influential religious leaders who attended the event conveyed the anti-extremism conclusions resulting from these discussions via media outlets throughout the country.