

# **DJIBOUTI 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion, but mandates equality for all faiths. The government maintained its authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including assets and personnel of all mosques. The government started to implement a decree to execute a law on state control of mosques that made imams civil service employees and transferred mosque property and assets to the government. Reports state that implementation has been slow, with fewer than half of the country's mosques having imams who are considered government employees.

Norms and customs continued to discourage conversion from Islam. There were reports of discrimination in employment and education against converts to Christianity.

In May the U.S. Secretary of State visited a mosque and promoted religious freedom and inclusiveness as a means to counter violent extremism. U.S. embassy officials met with the secretary general of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to discuss religious freedom, including the transfer of control of assets and personnel of mosques to the state. The Ambassador and other embassy officials shared with government and civil society leaders President Obama's Ramadan message on the importance of religious freedom in the United States and around the world, including at an embassy-hosted iftar.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 828,000 (July 2015 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. Non-Muslims are generally foreign-born citizens and expatriates, highly concentrated in Djibouti City.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

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,

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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 religiously based political parties.

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

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. Muslims have the option of using the civil or family courts. Civil courts address the same matters for non-Muslims. In legal matters, citizens are officially considered Muslim 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, every foreign religious group signs a one-year agreement detailing the scope of its activities. Foreign religious groups must submit quarterly reports to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and renew their agreements every year. Groups may not operate in the interim while awaiting registration.

### **Government Practices**

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs continued its efforts to implement a 2014 decree executing a law on state control of mosques, which converted the status of imams into civil service employees under the ministry and transferred ownership of mosque properties and other assets to the government. Government officials stated the decree aims to eliminate political activity from mosques, provide greater government oversight of mosque assets and activities, and counter perceived foreign influence. Reports state the implementation process has been slow. Less than half of the mosques in the country had an imam who was considered a civil

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service employee. The ministry met with an association of civil service employee imams to provide training and hold discussions on issues of concern.

In May the government inaugurated the newly-renovated al-Rahma Mosque in Djibouti City. The mosque had been closed since July 2014 when its imam was detained for 48 hours on charges of inciting an illegal demonstration. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs selected al-Rahma's new imam, a civil service employee.

The government continued to permit registered non-Islamic groups to operate freely, including Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches. For several of these groups, the government subsidized the cost of utilities at church properties. Religious groups not independently registered with the government, such as Ethiopian Protestant and non-Sunni Muslim congregations, operated under the auspices of registered groups. Smaller groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Bahais, were unregistered but operated privately without incident.

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.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs began a program this year in which religious leaders visit public schools for one-hour sessions to answer students' questions about religion. These sessions are not mandatory and are attended by students only on a voluntary basis.

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

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

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Societal norms and customs discouraged conversion from Islam, but conversions still occurred. Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of physical abuse against converts to Christianity by members of the converts' communities. There were 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 throwing stones at church property.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Secretary of State visited the Salman Mosque in May. Together with representatives from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, religious leaders, and students, the Secretary discussed how programs and partnerships – including those centered on religious freedom – can promote inclusiveness and prevent individuals from turning to violent extremism. U.S. embassy officials met with the secretary general of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to discuss issues of religious freedom, including the re-opening of al-Rahma Mosque and the transfer of mosques' assets and personnel to government control. 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 held at the Ambassador's residence.

Embassy officials also met with Christian and Muslim leaders to discuss interfaith relations and issues of respect for religious freedom.