

MALI 2019 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. Notwithstanding these legal protections for religious freedom, widespread insecurity stifled full implementation of laws protecting religious freedom. The presence of groups identified by the government as violent extremist organizations and armed groups in the northern and central areas of the country limited government capacity to govern and bring perpetrators of abuses to justice, especially outside the main cities. In February the government issued a decree creating a national secretariat for the implementation of a new national strategy to counter violent extremism (CVE). The strategy, launched in 2018 under the authority of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship, includes interfaith efforts and promotion of religious tolerance. Leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) said they experienced difficulties while attempting to register as an official religious institution, however in January the government granted the church official status.

Individuals affiliated with groups identified by authorities as extremist used violence and launched attacks on civilians, security forces, peacekeepers, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam. In the center of the country, affiliates of Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), a U.S.-designated terrorist alliance, attacked multiple towns in Mopti Region, threatening Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious communities, reportedly for heresy. Groups identified by authorities as extremist organizations targeted and closed government schools for their perceived “Western” curriculum, replacing them with Quranic schools. The United Nations estimated such groups had opened approximately 600 Quranic schools in the center of the country.

Muslim religious leaders condemned what they termed “extremist” interpretations of sharia, and non-Muslim religious leaders condemned extremism related to religion. Some Christian missionaries expressed concern about the increased influence in remote areas of organizations they characterized as violent and extremist. Muslim, Protestant, and Roman Catholic religious leaders jointly called for peace and solidarity among all faiths at celebrations marking Christmas, the New Year, and Eid al-Fitr. In September, while addressing a meeting on the role of religious leaders in the stabilization of the country, President of the High Islamic

Council of Mali (HCIM) Cherif Ousmane Madani Haidara called on attendees to take an active role and to serve as brokers of peace.

The U.S. embassy supported programs to counter violent extremism related to religion and to promote tolerance, peace, and reconciliation. The Ambassador and other officials discussed the importance of religious leaders helping bring peace to the country with former president of the HCIM Imam Mahmoud Dicko and other religious leaders, as well as with human rights organizations. The embassy sponsored the participation of an imam and owner of a *medersa* (Islamic religious school, a variant of *madrassah*) in a U.S. government exchange program aimed at empowering youth to counter violence and highlighted the importance of tolerance and respect for religious diversity on its social media accounts throughout the year.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 19 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to statistics from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship, 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 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, mostly in rural areas. Many Muslims and Christians also adhere to some aspects of indigenous beliefs. The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship estimates fewer than 1,000 individuals in Bamako and an unknown number outside of the capital are associated with the Muslim group Dawa al-Tablig.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as a secular state, prohibits discrimination based on religion, 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 by up to five years' imprisonment or 10 years' banishment (prohibition from residing in the country). The penal code also states any religiously motivated persecution of a

group of persons constitutes a crime against humanity. There is no statute of limitations for such crimes.

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 not registering. 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 leaders of the association with signature samples of three of the leaders. Upon review, if approved, the Ministry of Territorial Administration grants the certificate of registration.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship is responsible for administering the national CVE strategy, promoting religious tolerance, and coordinating national religious activities, such as pilgrimages and religious holidays for followers of all religions.

The constitution prohibits public schools from offering religious instruction but permits private schools to do so. Privately funded *medersas* teach the standard government curriculum as well as Islam. Non-Muslim students in these schools are not required to attend Islamic religious classes. Private Catholic schools teach the standard government curriculum and Catholic religious classes. Non-Catholic students in these schools are not required to attend Catholic religious classes. Informal schools, known locally as Quranic schools and which some students attend in lieu of public schools, do not follow a government curriculum and offer religious instruction exclusively.

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 and security forces struggled to tamp down violence generated by the spread of groups they described as violent extremist organizations in the North and Center Regions of the country – including armed religious groups as well as ethnically aligned militias.

In September members of the Church of Jesus Christ said the Church received official status from the government in January following previous difficulties to register but had been present in the country since 2017. Church leaders stated this official recognition as a public institution would allow the Church to minister to its congregation more easily and call for missionaries to serve.

In February the government issued a decree creating a national secretariat under the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship for the implementation of a new national CVE strategy. The strategy, launched in 2018, included interfaith efforts and promotion of religious tolerance.

In November the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship organized, in coordination with Archbishop of Bamako Cardinal Jean Zerbo, the annual Catholic pilgrimage to Kita. During the November 23-24 pilgrimage, Cardinal Zerbo and the president of the Episcopal Conference of Mali called for interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance among the different faiths. They were joined in their pilgrimage from Bamako to Kita by the Union of Young Malian Muslims (UJMA), a Muslim youth religious organization. The ministry also worked with private companies to ensure cooperation and organize local participation in the Hajj and other religious pilgrimages to Lourdes in France and Jerusalem in Israel. The government continued support of a Moroccan-funded training program for 500 Sufi imams in Morocco, one objective of which was to improve interfaith tolerance.

The Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission launched in 2014 continued operating during the year. In September the government renewed and extended the commission's mandate. During the year, the commission heard the testimony of 4,789 individuals compared with 3,592 in 2018 and 6,953 in 2017. Growing security concerns in the central and northern regions of the country, lack of transportation for victims, and the lack of testimony collection in camps for displaced persons limited the collection of testimony. As of February, the commission reported it collected a total of 16,088 statements since it began collecting testimony in January 2017, including cases involving religious freedom violations.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Throughout the year, mostly in the country's central and northern regions, domestic and transnational violent terrorist groups, including al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliates Ansar al-Dine, Macina Liberation Front, and Al-Mourabitoun, united under the umbrella JNIM, and continued to carry out attacks on domestic and international security forces, UN peacekeepers, civilians, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam. Armed groups have, in some instances, co-opted pre-existing intercommunal and ethnic tensions to further sow instability and violence, and it was not possible to attribute some incidents entirely to religious motives. Several of JNIM's public messages repeated their intent to govern Mali according to sharia.

According to the most recent Freedom House "Freedom in The World" report, religious freedom abuses accompanied intercommunal violence in the country. According to the report, "Islamist armed groups have reportedly compelled civilians to attend lectures at mosques, at which they promote their interpretations of Islam and discourage residents from having contact with the government and UN and French peacekeeping forces. There were a number of reports of armed attacks on mosques, as well as detentions and murders committed within."

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize some incidents as being solely based on religious identity. On June 9, armed men believed to be affiliated with JNIM killed at least 35 persons in an attack on the predominantly Christian town of Sobane Da, Mopti Region, according to media reports. Among those killed were men, women, and children, mostly Christians. According to the Human Rights Division of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, the attack was not religiously motivated. The UN report described the attack as an ethnic clash stemming from the escalation of a long-running competition over resources, including access to grazing land and water, between the mostly Muslim Fulani herders and the mainly Christian Dogon farmer community.

According to local media, on September 10, armed individuals believed to be terrorists entered the village of Kawerla, Koulikoro Region, and announced a ban on religious activities, such as baptisms and wedding ceremonies, and social activities, such as soccer. The armed group said these activities were not permissible under Islamic law and threatened to return if the villagers allowed the village's school to open.

Islamist armed groups targeted and closed government schools that taught any curriculum not based on Islam, replacing them with Quranic schools teaching a strict interpretation of Islam, according to Freedom House and media reports. The United Nations reported that groups it identified as extremists opened more than 600 schools offering only Quranic education throughout Mopti in the central part of the country, particularly near the border with Burkina Faso.

According to a local Christian leader, continued threats from JNIM prevented the Christian community in Djidja from reopening its church, which had closed in 2017 as a result of JNIM threats.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslim and non-Muslim religious leaders frequently and jointly condemned what they termed extremist interpretations of Islam and the violence perpetrated by extremist groups. For example, in September, representatives of the country's Muslim Association condemned an improvised explosive attack on a public bus that killed more than a dozen civilians. JNIM subsequently released an apology stating the bomb was not intended to target civilians.

Some Christian missionaries again expressed concern about the increased influence in remote areas of organizations they characterized as violent and extremist, which the missionaries said they believed could affect their ability to continue working in the country over the long term. According to Caritas, the expanding influence of what it described as violent extremist organizations, particularly in remote areas, increasingly threatened religious freedom in the country. Caritas representatives said they were concerned that the closure of government schools and opening of Quranic schools by what it termed extremist groups would negatively impact interreligious understanding and cooperation and could endanger Christianity in the country in the long term.

Ousmane Bocoum, a local Quranic teacher, civil society leader, and businessman with a broad social media reach, spread messages of tolerance to counter radical ideologies that drive violence and instability, particularly in the center of the country. Through his messaging, he promoted religious freedom as a facilitator of youth programs and leader of a peacebuilding program in Mopti.

During the June Eid al-Fitr celebration hosted by President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant religious leaders renewed their calls for peace and tolerance among all faiths.

In April Ousman Cherif Madani Haidara, chairman of the Muslim Group of Religious Leaders, was elected president of the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM) following the conclusion of Imam Mahmoud Dicko's term. In September Haidara called on attendees at a meeting on the role of religious leaders in the stabilization of the country to take an active role and serve as brokers of peace.

In June former HCIM president Imam Dicko, who held the position for 11 years, established an organization called the Coordination of Movements, Associations, and Supporters of Imam Dicko (CMAS) to "advance the wellbeing of all citizens." Dicko publicly denied his organization was a political movement and that he would run for office; however, some observers said they believed CMAS was a platform for Dicko's political ambitions and that his strong religious authority could threaten secular politics in the country. Imam Dicko previously publicly stated he did not intend to change what he termed the secular nature of the government.

Members of religious groups commonly attended the religious ceremonies of other religious groups, especially baptisms, weddings, and funerals. For example, in November members of a Muslim youth organization accompanied Christians on their pilgrimage from Bamako to Kita.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The embassy continued to work with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship to support programs to counter violent extremism related to religion. Embassy officials worked with vulnerable communities to build capacity to address conflict, radicalization, and religious violent extremism to help bring peace and reconciliation to the country. An imam and owner of a *medersa* participated in a U.S. government exchange program focusing on expanding educational, social, and employment opportunities for at-risk and disadvantaged youth and helping them avoid crime, violence, extremism, substance abuse, and other destructive behavior.

The Ambassador and embassy officers spoke with a wide range of religious leaders and human rights organizations to promote religious tolerance, including the former head of the HCIM Imam Dicko and local High Islamic Council presidents

in Segou and Sikasso. Embassy officials urged religious leaders to advocate for tolerance and peace among various social and religious groups. The embassy brought together local and religious leaders in economically depressed communities vulnerable to violent extremist influences to boost social cohesion, support peace, and build civil society; distributed Arabic-language books on religious tolerance; and partially funded repairs of the Grand Djenne Mosque.

The embassy highlighted the importance of tolerance and respect for religious diversity on its social media accounts throughout the year. Some of its most widely shared posts included the Ambassador's social media posts on Ramadan, Easter, Eid al-Fitr, and especially Eid al-Adha. For example, to commemorate Ramadan, the embassy highlighted the religious diversity of the United States and the different ways in which Muslims in the United States celebrate Ramadan "in a way that reflects the diversity of our country and the respect we have for pluralism." The embassy also worked with the Ministry of Religious Affairs to organize and fund the government's first diplomatic iftar. The event included interfaith community leaders.