

# NIGER 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and worship consistent with public order, social peace, and national unity. It provides for the separation of state and religion and prohibits religiously affiliated political parties. The government prohibits full-face veils in Diffa Region under state of emergency provisions to prevent concealment of bombs and weapons. The government also prohibits open-air, public proselytization events due to stated safety concerns. According to media sources, President Mahamadou Issoufou, during his reelection campaign in February, said he would regulate the expansion of Wahhabism in the country but took no action as of year's end.

According to religious leaders, cooperation between Christian and Muslim communities continued to improve in the wake of the violent and deadly January 2015 protests in the cities of Niamey and Zinder. The unrest was sparked by President Issoufou's public statement "We are all Charlie" at an event in Paris commemorating the *Charlie Hebdo* killings. While the majority of the population adheres to the Maliki interpretation of Sunni Islam, Muslim leaders reported Wahhabism grew in size and influence during the year. The head of the Islamic Association of Niger and the Archbishop of Niamey urged mutual cooperation on National Cleanup Day in October, highlighting the importance of cleanliness and equating clean communities with faith.

In July the U.S. Second Lady met with officials from the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and leaders from a variety of religious groups to discuss the importance of religious tolerance, diversity, and respect in combating extremism and volatility in the region. The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives continued to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance through meetings with Muslim leaders and support of inter- and intrafaith dialogues throughout the country. The embassy hosted events and organized outreach activities and exchange programs with religious and civil society leaders to promote religious tolerance and encourage interfaith dialogue, including several interfaith iftars.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 18.6 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the MOI, more than 98 percent of the population is Muslim. Approximately 95 percent of Muslims are Sunni and 5 percent Shia.

Roman Catholic and Protestant groups account for less than 2 percent of the population. There are a few thousand Bahais, who reside primarily in Niamey and in communities on the west side of the Niger River. A very small percentage of the population adheres primarily to indigenous religious beliefs. Some individuals adhere to syncretic religious beliefs that combine traditional indigenous practices with Islam.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, specifies separation of religion and state as an unalterable principle, and stipulates equality under the law for all regardless of religion. It provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship and expression of faith consistent with public order, social peace, and national unity. The constitution also states no religion or faith shall claim political power or interfere in state affairs and bans political parties based on religious affiliation.

Nongovernmental organizations, including religious organizations, must register with the MOI. Registration approval is based on submission of required legal documents, such as the group's charter, and vetting of the organization's leaders. Although some unregistered religious organizations reportedly operate without authorization in remote areas, only registered organizations are legally recognized entities. The MOI requires clerics speaking to a large national gathering either to belong to a registered religious organization or to obtain a special permit. Nonregistered groups are not legal entities and are not permitted to operate.

Registered religious groups wishing to obtain permanent legal status must undergo a three-year review and probationary period before the Office of Religious Affairs, which is under the MOI, grants a change in legal status from probationary to permanent.

The constitution specifies the president, the prime minister, and the president of the national assembly must take an oath on the holy book of his or her religion. By law, other senior government officials are also required to take religious oaths upon entering office.

The government prohibits full-face veils in Diffa Region under state of emergency provisions to prevent concealment of bombs and weapons.

The government prohibits open-air, public proselytization events for all religious groups due to expressed safety concerns. There is no restriction on private peaceful proselytization or conversion of an individual's personal religious beliefs from one religious faith to another, as long as the group espousing the transition is registered with the government.

The establishment of any religious school must receive the concurrence of both the MOI and the relevant Ministry of Education. Private Quranic schools are unregulated. There is no religious education in public schools.

There are no restrictions on the issuance of visas for visiting religious leaders; however, permanent residency of foreign religious leaders must be approved by the MOI.

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

### **Government Practices**

According to media sources, President Issoufou, during his reelection campaign in February, said he would regulate the expansion of Wahhabism in the country but took no action as of year's end. Then-Interior Minister Hassoumi Massaoudou stated during the presidential campaign that there was a need to organize and regulate the construction of Wahhabi mosques in the country.

Media sources reported campaigns for the presidential and parliamentary elections in February often opened with the Fatiha, the proclamation of faith at the beginning of the Quran.

The Commission for the Organization of the Hajj and Umrah attempted to redress the poor organization of the Hajj by local travel agencies by facilitating travel to Saudi Arabia. Some pilgrims reported the commission made the Hajj less burdensome; however, others said they were delayed in their departure to or from Saudi Arabia due to logistical challenges. Several pilgrims reported they were left stranded at an airport in Niamey after the Commission for the Organization of the Hajj and Umrah failed to pay the contracted air carrier. In October the commissioner was subsequently dismissed.

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

According to religious leaders, cooperation between Christian and Muslim communities continued to improve in the wake of the violent and deadly January 2015 protests in the cities of Niamey and Zinder. The unrest was sparked by President Issoufou's public statement "We are all Charlie" at an event in Paris commemorating the *Charlie Hebdo* killings.

While the majority of the population adheres to the Maliki interpretation of Sunni Islam, Muslim leaders reported Wahhabism grew in size and influence during the year. Media sources reported thousands of Wahhabi mosques and madrasas were built over the past few years.

The head of the Islamic Association of Niger and the Archbishop of Niamey urged mutual cooperation on National Cleanup Day in October, highlighting the importance of cleanliness and equating clean communities with faith.

The Muslim-Christian Interfaith Forum remained active in all regions of the country. The forum promoted cooperation among religious leaders from a range of religious groups, and members of the forum met regularly to discuss community peace and other matters of mutual concern.

Muslims and Christians commonly attended one another's festivities during their respective holidays. Bibles in Arabic and the major local languages were available for sale in the local markets.

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

In July the U.S. Second Lady visited Niamey and met with officials from the MOI, as well as leaders from a variety of religious groups, to discuss the importance of religious tolerance, diversity, and respect in combating extremism and volatility in the region.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives continued to advocate for religious freedom and tolerance through meetings with Muslim leaders and support of inter- and intrafaith dialogues throughout the country. The Ambassador hosted an iftar, which included Muslim, Christian, and Bahai leaders, government officials, and members of civil society, where she delivered remarks emphasizing the importance of interfaith tolerance. The embassy continued to engage with an interreligious council composed of Muslim and Christian leaders.