

# **DJIBOUTI 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but mandates equality for persons of all faiths. The government maintained its authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including assets and personnel of all mosques. Non-Muslim groups register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which conducts lengthy background checks as part of the registration process. The government continued to implement a decree for state control of mosques, and the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs' High Islamic Council closely vetted all Friday prayer service sermons, reportedly dismissing imams for sermons deemed extremist.

Norms and customs continued to discourage conversion from Islam.

Embassy officials met with Ministry of Education personnel to request that they permit youth refugees to observe their respective religious holidays, since this was the first year the ministry integrated refugee students into the national education system; previously the Ministry of Education has permitted students to observe only Islamic holidays. U.S. embassy officials also shared the Secretary of State's Ramadan and Eid al-Adha messages on the importance of religious freedom with government and civil society leaders, including at embassy-hosted iftars and on the embassy's Facebook page.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 865,000 (July 2017 estimate), of which 94 percent is Sunni Muslim. Shia Muslims, 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.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates the registered refugee population at approximately 27,700, of whom 48 percent are from Somalia, 16 percent from Yemen, 32 percent from Ethiopia, and 4 percent from Eritrea. No data exists on the religious affiliations of refugees, but they engage in both Muslim and non-Muslim worship.

## **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, 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 and Cultural Affairs has authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including mosques, religious events, and private Islamic schools. The Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs and the Ministry of Education jointly oversee the school curricula and teacher certification of approximately 40 Islamic schools. The public school system is secular.

The president swears an Islamic religious oath.

Muslims may bring matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance either to family courts, whose code includes elements of civil and Islamic law, or to civil courts. 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 inform the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs of their existence and intent to operate and are subject to neither registration nor investigation by the Ministry of Interior. Muslim and non-Muslim foreign religious groups must also gain approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to operate in the country. 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. The quarterly report details activities, origin of funding for activities, and scope of work completed, and it identifies beneficiaries. Non-Muslim religious groups may not operate in the interim while awaiting registration.

The government is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The government has declared a reservation regarding proselytizing in open public spaces.

## Government Practices

The Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs continued its efforts to implement a 2014 decree executing a law on state control of mosques, which converted the status of imams, including refugee imams, to civil service employees under the ministry and transferred ownership of mosque properties and other assets to the government. The ministry's High Islamic Council sent instructions on and closely vetted all Friday prayer service sermons, reportedly dismissing imams for sermons deemed extremist. Government officials stated the decree aimed to eliminate political activity from mosques, provide greater government oversight of mosque assets and activities, and counter foreign influence. Virtually all mosques in the country had an imam who was a civil service employee.

In November the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs organized its fifth annual forum of *ulemas* (Muslim scholars) from East Africa, including *ulemas* from Djibouti, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Comoros, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. President Ismail Omar Guelleh opened the forum, noting the main theme was a review of "religious conceptions and cultural perceptions" to change "mentalities and behaviors." Participants in the three-day forum discussed strategies of leveraging social media in East Africa to engage youth, promote tolerance, and mitigate violent extremism.

The government continued to permit registered non-Islamic groups, including Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches, to operate freely, according to Christian leaders. For registered non-Islamic groups, the government subsidized the cost of utilities at church properties, since it considered some church properties to be part of the national patrimony. 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 not registered with the government but operated privately without incident, according to Christian leaders.

The government continued to recognize legal Islamic marriages conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and civil marriages conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior for non-Muslims and interfaith couples. The government also recognized non-Islamic religious marriages, when documentation from the religious organization performing the ceremony was provided.

The Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs continued to sponsor a program in which religious leaders visited public schools for one-hour sessions to answer students' questions about religion. Participation in these weekly sessions, designed to broaden students' knowledge of world religions, was not mandatory.

The government continued to allow non-Islamic religious groups to host events and proselytize on the groups' private property; in practice, groups refrained from proselytizing in public spaces, such as hotels or street corners, due to cultural sensitivities. The government continued to permit a limited number of Christian missionaries to sell religious books and pamphlets at a local bookstore.

The government continued to issue 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.

Local public schools continued to observe only Islamic holidays, but schools permitted refugee students to miss class for their respective religious holidays.

In response to a violent ISIS attack on Christians in Egypt on April 9 (Palm Sunday), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent messages of condolence condemning the attack and expressing its solidarity with the victims' families. The government-run newspaper, *La Nation*, published the ministry's message.

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

Societal norms and customs discouraged conversion from Islam, but conversions reportedly still occurred, particularly for marriages with non-Islamic partners. Christian groups reported continued discrimination in employment and education against converts to Christianity who changed their names.

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

With the government integrating refugee youth into the national education system for the first time during the year, embassy officials requested that the Ministry of Education permit students in the refugee camps to observe their respective religious holidays, given the religious diversity of the refugee population.

Embassy personnel shared the Secretary of State's Ramadan message on the importance of religious freedom with government, religious, and civil society leaders, including at an embassy-hosted iftar.