

# **BURKINA FASO 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution states the country is a secular state, and both it and other laws provide for the right of individuals to choose and change their religion and to practice the religion of their choice. In March military forces killed one individual and arrested 18 associated with the Islamist group Ansarul Islam near the Mali border. The security minister stated that the country is determined to defeat extremists trying to enforce sharia near the country's northern border. In September the High Council of Communication (CSC) summoned and questioned executives from the radio station Al Houda for content it stated was "undermining the principle of religious tolerance," in reference to a preacher's on-air comment that Muslim adherents to Ahmadiyya Islam should not be considered Muslims. In January the government withdrew a draft bill regulating religious organizations and practices following complaints from Muslim leaders. The government continued to subsidize travel costs for Muslim Hajj pilgrims and allocated subsidies to the four main religious groups (Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and traditional/animist).

In March armed men killed two individuals in Kourfayel, including a teacher, and threatened to kill teachers if they did not start teaching the Quran in schools instead of the regular curricula.

Embassy staff regularly discussed issues affecting religious freedom with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, including the attacks on teachers and the draft bill regulating religious organizations and practices. The embassy held a roundtable in November with government representatives, religious leaders, civil society groups, and journalists to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and tolerance and provide a framework to discuss how to strengthen the state of religious tolerance. The Ambassador hosted an iftar for young leaders in July to promote interfaith tolerance and dialogue. Embassy officers also met with religious leaders to promote religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 20.1 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2006 census, 61 percent of the population is Muslim, predominantly Sunni, 19 percent is Roman Catholic, 4 percent belong to various

Protestant groups, and 15 percent maintain exclusively indigenous beliefs. Less than 1 percent is atheist or belongs to other religious groups. Statistics on religious affiliation are approximate because Muslims and Christians often adhere simultaneously to some aspects of indigenous religious beliefs.

Muslims reside largely in the northern, eastern, and western border regions, and Christians are concentrated in the center of the country. Indigenous religious beliefs are practiced throughout the country, especially in rural communities. The capital has a mixed Muslim and Christian population. There is no significant correlation between religious affiliation, ethnicity, or political or socioeconomic status.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states the country is secular, and both it and other laws provide for the right of individuals to choose and change their religion and to practice the religion of their choice. The constitution states freedom of belief is subject to respect for law, public order, good morals, and “the human person.” Political parties based on religion, ethnicity, or regional affiliation are forbidden.

The law allows all organizations, religious or otherwise, to register with the Ministry of Territorial Administration, Decentralization, and Internal Security, which is in charge of religious affairs. The ministry, through the Directorate for Customary Affairs and Worship, monitors the implementation of standards for burial, exhumation, and transfer of the remains; helps organize religious pilgrimages; promotes and fosters interreligious dialogue and peace; and develops and implements measures for the erection of places of worship and the registration of religious organizations and religious congregations. The registration process usually takes approximately three to four weeks and costs less than 50,000 CFA francs (\$89). Registration confers legal status but no specific obligations or benefits. Religious organizations are not required to register, but when they do so, failure to comply with applicable regulations required by all registered organizations may result in a fine of 50,000 to 150,000 CFA francs (\$89 to \$270).

Religious groups operate under the same regulatory framework for publishing and broadcasting as other entities. The Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization may request copies of proposed publications and broadcasts to

verify they are in accordance with the nature of the religious group as stated in their registration.

Religious teaching is not allowed in public schools. Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant groups operate private primary and secondary schools and some schools of higher education. By law, schools (religious or not) must submit the names of their directors to the government and register their schools with the Ministry of National Education and Literacy, but the government does not appoint or approve these officials.

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

### **Government Practices**

In March military forces killed one individual and arrested 18 associated with the militant Islamist group Ansarul Islam near the Mali border. The security minister stated that the country was determined to defeat what he termed extremists trying to enforce sharia.

The National Observatory of Religious Facts (ONAFAR), an organization created by the government in 2015 to “monitor regulations on cultural practices” and promote tolerance and interfaith dialogue, continued to monitor religious communities and cultural practices. Along with monitoring, the ONAFAR played a mediator role within the religious community to mitigate tensions between communities through dialogue. For example, the ONAFAR intervened in the Hauts-Bassins region to conduct mediation within a community in which a dispute over funeral rites to be performed on a deceased individual who had converted to Islam had resulted in violence. The ONAFAR, along with national and local government officials, met with the community leaders and members to find a peaceful resolution.

On January 9, the government announced the withdrawal of a draft bill designed to regulate religious organizations and practices, after the Federation of Burkina Islamic Associations (FAIB) publicly expressed concerns that the proposed bill would “reduce their freedom of conscience and worship.” The FAIB specifically objected to provisions stating that collective worship shall take place exclusively in buildings intended for public worship that have received prior authorization from authorities. It also objected to a provision that would prevent public officials from “conspicuously” and visibly exhibiting their religious beliefs in the performance of their duties. The FAIB additionally opposed provisions that required leaders of

religious organizations and associations to “demonstrate solid knowledge of religious matters attested by at least one recognized structure or institution.”

The government continued to give all religious groups equal access to registration and routinely approved their applications, according to religious group leaders.

The government generally did not fund religious schools or require them to pay taxes unless they conducted for-profit activities. The government provided subsidies to a number of Catholic schools as part of an agreement allowing students from public schools to enroll in Catholic schools when public schools are at full capacity. The government taxed religious groups only if they engaged in commercial activities, such as farming or dairy production. The government reviewed the curricula of religious schools to ensure they offered the full standard academic curriculum; however, the majority of Quranic schools were not registered, and thus their curricula were not reviewed.

The government allocated 75 million CFA francs (\$133,000) each to the Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and traditional animistic communities. According to the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, the government could provide an additional subsidy under the following circumstances: when the religious community or organization pursued a mission of general interest, such as education, health, or vocational training; when the religious community conducted an activity of national interest, such as promoting peace or social stability; or when the success or failure of an activity could have affected a significant part of the population, as in the case of religious pilgrimages. The government also provided funding to registered Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim (commonly referred to as “Franco-Arabic”) schools through subsidies for teacher salaries, which were typically less than those of public school teachers.

In August the government allocated approximately one billion CFA francs (\$1.78 million) to subsidize the costs of the 8,100 Muslims going on the Hajj.

On September 8, the ethics commission of the CSC, the governmental body in charge of regulating media, summoned and questioned officials of the Al Houda radio station for content it stated was “undermining the principle of religious tolerance” and violating the terms of agreements signed between the CSC and media organizations. During a program, a preacher stated that individuals adhering to Ahmadiyya beliefs should not be considered Muslims, prompting a complaint from a listener. Al Houda radio officials had been summoned in a similar incident in 2016. A CSC commission reviewed the case and sent a warning letter to Al

Houda radio. The CSC could adopt sanctions against the radio if another incident occurs.

### **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

In March armed men killed a teacher and a resident in the northern city of Kourfayel. Several media reports indicated that armed men entered classrooms in Wonrongoma, Pelem Pelem, and Lassa and threatened teachers, telling them they would be killed if they did not start teaching the Quran instead of the regular curricula. This attack caused the temporary closure of dozens of schools and the departure of teachers from the region. Governmental delegations including the minister of security and the minister of education traveled several times to the region and met with representatives of teachers and local authorities to discuss ways to ensure the safety of teachers working in the northern part of the country.

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

Members of the Burkinabe Muslim Community Organization, the Catholic Archdiocese of Ouagadougou, and the (Protestant) Federation of Evangelical Churches stated religious tolerance was widespread and numerous examples existed of families of mixed faiths and religious leaders attending each other's holidays and celebrations. Members of the main religious communities promoted interfaith dialogue and tolerance through public institutions, such as the ONAFAR, which conducted awareness campaigns and mediations throughout the country, but also through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Dori-based Fraternal Union of Believers, which since 1969 involved various religious communities to conduct socioeconomic activities with the goal of fostering religious tolerance. In 2010 the Catholic Church established a commission on Islamic-Christian dialogue, which held periodic meetings to promote interfaith dialogue. Catholic and Muslim leaders in the country's second largest city, Bobo Dioulasso, worked together to organize a united peace march to condemn the August 13 attacks on a Turkish-owned café by suspected Islamists and also to resolve together issues such as the unauthorized construction of a mosque on Catholic Church-owned land. The Catholic and Muslim leadership agreed to provide a new plot of land for the Catholic Church instead of demolishing the mosque.

New Muslim and Protestant congregations opened without approval and oversight from existing Muslim and Protestant federations. Religious leaders stated that the Muslim and Protestant federations were often undermined by small new minority

religious groups not falling under their oversight that took positions counter to the federation's messages of tolerance. For example, some religious leaders reportedly discouraged traditional interfaith courtesy calls during a religious holiday.

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

Embassy staff regularly discussed events and policies affecting religious freedom with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, including the dispute over funeral rites in Haut-Bassins Region and the draft bill to regulate religious organizations and practices.

The Ambassador and embassy officials met separately with Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant religious leaders throughout the country, at the local and national levels, to encourage their efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and advocate for religious tolerance and freedom.

On November 16, the Ambassador and embassy officials invited representatives and journalists for a roundtable to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and tolerance, and provide a framework to discuss and strengthen the state of religious tolerance in the country. Representatives from the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization; the Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and Traditional communities; the ONAFAR; and the Dori-based NGO Union Fraternelle des Croyants (Fraternal Union of Believers) were invited.

On July 22, the Ambassador hosted an iftar with young leaders from religious communities and civil society to promote interfaith tolerance and dialogue and discussed how youth could play a positive role.