

# **BURKINA FASO 2020 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. International media reported that terrorist groups, armed insurgents, and jihadists continued their campaign of violence and sometimes targeted places of worship or religious leaders in an attempt to divide the country along sectarian lines. On October 21, at a government forum on “national cohesion,” Speaker of the National Assembly Allassane Bala Sakande stated, “In this war against terrorism, we are not engaged against an ethnic group or against a religion, but we are engaged against those who hate Burkina Faso and the Burkinabe.” In July, Minister of Interior and Territorial Administration Simeon Sawadogo joined the Catholic Archbishop of Ouagadougou during Eid al-Fitr prayers led by the Grand Imam of Ouagadougou and called on the population to “cultivate religious tolerance.” The government issued a decree integrating traditional religions into the Office of National Religious Affairs (ONAFAR), a government office whose main mission is to promote interreligious dialogue, and prevent and manage conflicts of a religious nature.

Domestic and transnational terrorist groups operated throughout the year, resulting in numerous targeted killings based on religious identity, according to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Attackers killed imams, other clergy, and worshippers while attacking and destroying mosques and churches. Reports stated that they also forced communities in the northern part of the country to dress in specific “Islamic” garb. Terrorists attacked schools and killed teachers for teaching a secular curriculum and for teaching in French rather than Arabic, according to media reports. As of August, terrorist violence forced more than 2,500 schools to close, depriving more than 330,000 children of education, according to UNICEF. Expanding their targeted killings, terrorist groups increasingly attacked Christian religious leaders and worshippers and destroyed churches.

Human rights organizations and religious groups continued to express concern that religiously targeted violence threatened what they termed the traditional peaceful coexistence of religious groups in the country. Academic and other observers stated that the “stigmatization” of the mostly Muslim ethnic-Fulani community

because of their perceived sympathy for Islamists aggravated existing societal tensions and posed a threat to stability.

U.S. embassy officials discussed the continued increase in religiously motivated attacks, particularly in the Sahel and Est Regions, with the government, including the Ministries of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Security, and the Office of the President. In addition, embassy staff met religious leaders to promote religious freedom, interfaith tolerance, and civil dialogue. Throughout the year, the Ambassador or *Charge d’Affaires* met with imams and Catholic and Protestant leaders to reinforce U.S. support for religious freedom and tolerance. During the year, the embassy conducted regular outreach with imams, Catholic priests, and Protestant leaders to understand the current threat to religious freedom and tolerance in the country as a result of the unprecedented violence against both Christian and Muslim worshippers.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 20.8 million (midyear 2020 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 one 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 traditional or animist religious beliefs.

Muslims reside largely in the northern, eastern, and western border regions, while Christians are concentrated in the center of the country. Traditional and animist religious beliefs are practiced throughout the country, especially in rural communities. The capital has a mixed Muslim and Christian population.

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

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states the country is secular, and both the constitution 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 and Decentralization, which oversees religious affairs. The ministry, through the Directorate for Customary Affairs and Worship, monitors the implementation of standards for burial, exhumation, and transfer of 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. Registration confers legal status, and the process usually takes approximately three to four weeks and costs less than 50,000 CFA francs (\$95). Religious organizations are not required to register unless they seek legal recognition by the government, but after they are registered, they must comply with applicable regulations required of all registered organizations or be subject to a fine of 50,000 to 150,000 CFA francs (\$95 to \$280).

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 its registration and it may conduct permit application reviews.

The government generally does not fund religious schools or require them to pay taxes unless they conduct for-profit activities. The government provides 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 taxes religious groups only if they engage in commercial activities, such as farming or dairy production.

Religious education is not allowed in public schools. Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant groups operate private primary and secondary schools and some institutions of higher education. These schools are permitted to provide religious instruction to their students. 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. The government does not appoint or approve these officials, however. The government periodically reviews the curricula of new religious schools as they open, as well as others, to ensure they offer the full standard academic curriculum. The majority of Quranic schools are not registered, however, and thus their curricula not reviewed.

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

## Government Practices

The government stated that terrorists attacked religious institutions with the aim of dividing the population. On October 21, at a government forum on “national cohesion,” Speaker of the National Assembly Allassane Bala Sakande stated, “In this war against terrorism, we are not engaged against an ethnic group or against a religion, but we are engaged against those who hate Burkina Faso and the Burkinabe.”

Following the kidnapping and killing of the grand Imam of Djibo by armed groups in Soum Province on August 11, President Roch Marc Christian Kabore said he “strongly condemned” the “barbaric assassination” which “aimed to undermine our model of religious tolerance and the foundations of our nation.”

Following a February 16 attack by approximately 20 armed assailants on the village of Pansi in Yagha Province during which a pastor and 23 others were killed, opposition political party head Jean Hubert Bazie said it was “imperative that the state secure places of worship, as well as other places where citizens gather” and called on the government to create a national body to monitor religious freedom and prevent interreligious confrontation.

The government allocated 75 million CFA francs (\$142,000) each to the Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and animist communities, the same level as the previous year. Sources stated that this funding was meant to demonstrate equitable government support to all religious groups in the country. 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.

On August 6, the government issued a decree integrating the traditional animist communities into ONAFAR, providing animist communities with representation in the government agency responsible for promoting interreligious dialogue as well as preventing and managing conflicts of a religious nature.

The government continued to routinely approve applications from religious groups for registration, according to religious group leaders, although the government indicated it had rejected some on “moral” grounds.

In September, the government intervened in a legal dispute between Christian and Muslim groups involving a plot of land in Ouagadougou where a mosque had been

destroyed. In an October 7 statement, the government said that it “disapproves of the destruction of a place of worship” and that it had taken ownership of the disputed property and would fund reconstruction of the mosque.

In June, the Archbishop of Ouagadougou, Cardinal Philippe Ouedraogo, joined Minister of Interior and Territorial Administration Simeon Sawadogo during Eid al-Fitr prayers led by the Grand Imam of Ouagadougou.

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

Domestic and transnational terrorist groups continued to operate throughout the year and carried out targeted killings of individuals based on their religious identity, according to media reports. These groups included U.S.-designated terrorist groups Ansaroul Islam, Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISIS-GS), Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, and al-Mourabitoun. Although many attacks in the country went unclaimed, observers attributed most to terrorist groups, including Ansaroul Islam, JNIM, and ISIS-GS. Media reported that the terrorist groups regularly targeted Muslim and Christian clergy, religious congregations, houses of worship, teachers, local government employees, and schools. Some imams were killed after being accused of collaborating with security forces. As of August, terrorist violence forced at least 2,500 schools to close, depriving more than 330,000 children of education, according to UNICEF. In a number of attacks, militants singled out and killed individuals wearing Christian imagery such as crucifixes, according to media reports and church leaders. Some attacks took place at houses of worship, both Christian and Islamic, during prayers or services.

Examples of attacks against Christians reported by media, NGOs, and the government included a Sunday, February 9 attack on an evangelical Protestant church in Nagnounbougou in the Est Region during a religious service. At least two Christians were killed as they tried to flee from the attackers.

On January 25 in Silgadji in Soum Province, militants believed to be from JNIM or ISIS-GS killed approximately 30 civilians. The attackers ordered men to wear beards and to no longer wear pants that cover the entire leg. They had ordered women to wear a veil, threatening reprisals against those who did not comply

February 9, suspected ISIS-GS/JNIM militants attacked a church in Matiakoali, Est Region, and killed two worshippers.

On February 10, militants kidnapped and killed Deacon Babilibile Lankoande from the International Missionary Society Evangelical Christian Church in Sebba in the northeastern part of the country. On February 13, armed assailants kidnapped Pastor Omar Tindano of the same church as well as two of his daughters, his son, and two nephews. The two girls were released the same day, but the pastor and his son and nephews later were found dead.

On Feb 28, militants killed at least 20 civilians at Rektoulga in Bouroum commune, Sanmantinga Province. Paul Ouedraogo, an internally displaced local pastor of the International Evangelization Center, was among the dead.

On May 29 and 30, militants killed 58 individuals in northern and eastern provinces during several attacks that reportedly targeted Christians and humanitarian aid workers, according to religious media. Approximately 30 persons were killed in the attack at Kompienbiga cattle market near Pama in the east and at least 25 in attacks on two convoys, including a humanitarian one, near Barsalogo in the north.

On August, 11, the Grand Imam of Djibo Souaibou Cisse was kidnapped by armed assailants at Gaskinde while travelling in a bus in Soum Province. His body was found on August 15. President Kabore condemned the killing as “revealing the deeply backward and inhuman nature of its authors.”

On September 15, 50 militants stormed the village of Kontiana, Yagha Province, looking for government forces, informants, and civil servants, according to social media. They threatened Imam Hamadou Amadou and told the villagers to leave or they would burn the village down. The militants left after four hours.

On October 16, the high commissioner of Koulpeologo Province in Centre-Est Region declared a curfew from 8 P.M. to 4:30 A.M. following threats by militants, who told the local population to close school and bars, to stop brewing local beer, and to wear trousers above the ankle.

On November 28, armed assailants attacked Mansila in Yagha Province, killed one individual, kidnapped the imam, and shot two others. Two days earlier, the same group attacked villagers with whips and ordered men to wear pants above the ankle and women to wear a veil, which they said was required based on their interpretation of the teachings of Islam.

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

Human rights organizations and religious groups continued to express concern that religiously targeted violence threatened what they termed the “traditional peaceful coexistence” of religious groups in the country. Observers continued to report the stigmatization of the Fulani ethnic community because of its perceived association with militant Islamist groups. They said that this aggravated social tensions in some regions, since self-defense militias at times exacted vigilante justice on Fulani communities in northern and central regions of the country because of their alleged connection to “jihadists.”

On November 8, an unknown individual threw a Molotov cocktail into a mosque in the capital during Friday evening prayers, wounding six persons. Media reported a note left nearby said, “Close the mosque or we’ll launch grenades at you.”

Members of the Burkinabe Muslim Community Organization, the Catholic Archdiocese of Ouagadougou, and the Federation of Evangelical Churches continued to state that despite an increase in religiously motivated attacks, religious tolerance remained widespread and numerous examples existed of families of mixed faiths and religious leaders attending each other’s holidays and celebrations. Members of the largest religious communities promoted interfaith dialogue and tolerance through public institutions such as the National Observatory of Religious Facts, which conducted awareness campaigns throughout the country. They also worked through NGOs such as the Dori-based Fraternal Union of Believers, which encouraged various religious communities, specifically in the Sahel Region, to conduct socioeconomic activities with the goal of fostering religious tolerance.

As in previous years, new Muslim and Protestant congregations continued to open without approval and oversight from existing Muslim and Protestant federations. Religious leaders stated the Muslim and Protestant federations were often undermined by small new religious groups that did not fall under their oversight and that took positions counter to the federation’s messages of tolerance. They said the lack of oversight made it difficult for official religious groups to monitor and regulate the activities and messages of these new groups.

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

Embassy officials raised the continued increase in religiously motivated attacks, particularly in the Sahel and Est Regions, with the government, including the Ministries of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, the Ministries of

Defense and Security, and the Office of the President. Embassy staff regularly discussed events and policies affecting religious freedom with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, including the equitable registration process for religious groups, the equitable treatment of religious groups by the government, and the status of the relationship between the ministry and different religious groups.

The Ambassador and embassy officials met separately with Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant religious leaders to encourage their efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and advocate for religious tolerance and freedom.

Embassy representatives used social media platforms to reinforce messaging that promoted religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador regularly raised the need to counter the threats to the country's tradition of religious freedom and tolerance.

The embassy funded literacy programming in registered Quranic schools in northern parts of the country, the curriculum of which focused on peaceful dialogue, nonviolent conflict resolution, and religious tolerance.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador or *Charge d'Affaires* met with imams, priests, and pastors to reinforce U.S. support for religious freedom and tolerance. During the year, embassy officers conducted regular outreach with imams, Catholic priests, and Protestant leaders to understand the current threat to religious freedom and tolerance in the wake of the unprecedented violence against both Christian and Muslim worshippers perpetrated by terrorists. Throughout the year, embassy officials organized or supported several activities to respond to the social divisions between religious groups. For example, the embassy supported training for religious leaders on building tolerance and stability in their communities, conflict management, and fostering inter- and intrareligious cohesion.