

# **MALI 2015 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. Terrorist groups espoused violence and launched attacks in the name of an extremist interpretation of Islam against civilians, security forces, peacekeepers, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their religious beliefs. A November 20 assault later claimed by al-Murabitoun, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Dine, and the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) killed 19 civilians at the Radisson Hotel in Bamako. Perpetrators reportedly spared victims who could recite passages from the Quran. Although Ministry of Justice officials stated resources were inadequate, the government continued efforts to investigate abuses carried out by violent extremist groups.

Muslim and non-Muslim religious leaders frequently and jointly condemned extremist interpretations of sharia. In January religious leaders, including Muslims, Protestants, and Catholics, travelled to France to condemn violent interpretations of Islamic law, jointly called for peace among all, and organized national prayers for peace.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives conveyed messages of religious tolerance to government leaders in private and, along with civil society interlocutors, in speeches, at embassy-hosted interfaith events, and at other events. The U.S. embassy supported training programs to promote religious tolerance and counter violent extremist messaging, and discussed religious freedom with religious leaders, human rights organizations, and civil society throughout the year. For example, the U.S. embassy paid for and organized a visit by an imam from a U.S. university during Ramadan to conduct workshops and deliver speeches about tolerance and Islam.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.9 million (July 2015 estimate). Muslims constitute an estimated 95 percent of the population, according to the U.S. government. 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 Roman 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

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country, but are mostly present in rural areas. Many Muslims and Christians also adhere to some aspects of indigenous beliefs. There are fewer than 1,000 individuals in Bamako and an unknown number outside of the capital associated with the Muslim group Dawa al-Tabligh.

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

#### Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as a secular state 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 with up to five years of imprisonment or 10 years' banishment (prohibition from residing in the country).

Under the penal code, any religiously motivated persecution of a group of people constitutes a crime against humanity. There is no statute of limitations for such crimes and they may be tried in the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The law requires registration of all public associations, including religious groups, except for groups practicing indigenous religious beliefs; however, registration confers no tax preference or other legal benefits and there is no penalty for failure to register. To register, applicants must submit in duplicate 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 names of the leaders of the association with signature samples of three of the leaders. Upon review, the Ministry of Territorial Administration grants the certificate of registration.

The constitution prohibits public schools from offering religious instruction, whereas private schools are allowed to do so. Religious schools, known locally as *medersas* (a variant of *madrassah*), teach religion but are required to adhere to the standard government curriculum, although these schools are privately funded. Informal schools, known locally as "Quranic schools," do not follow a government curriculum and offer exclusively religious instruction.

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The law defines marriage as secular and does not recognize religious marriage. Couples who seek legal recognition need to have an additional civil ceremony. The law states that the religious customs of the deceased determine inheritance rights. Regular civil courts take these customs into account if they adjudicate such cases, but cases are often settled informally through traditional means.

Passports and national identity documents do not designate religious identity.

### Government Practices

The government continued to investigate incidents by violent extremists who enforced harsh interpretations of sharia through executions, amputations, and floggings during their 2012 occupation of the north. By year's end, the government had not tried any high profile cases. The Ministry of Justice stated inadequate resources and security conditions in the north inhibited judicial investigations.

The government continued to collaborate with ICC investigators to prosecute individuals who committed crimes against the country's religious and cultural heritage. In September Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, also known as Abu Tourab, was arrested in Niger and presented to the pretrial chamber of the ICC in The Hague. He was allegedly involved in the 2012 destruction of nine mausoleums and a mosque in Timbuktu. The case was part of an investigation the ICC launched in response to a July 2012 request by the local government.

At year's end, the investigation into the alleged crimes of Houka ag al-Housseiny had not yet gone to trial, reportedly due to challenges collecting sufficient evidence. Domestic and international security forces stated they suspected ag al-Housseiny of having acted as a judge for AQIM during the group's occupation of Timbuktu, and of ordering floggings and amputations in that capacity. The government provisionally released him in August 2014. Similarly, no progress was made in the investigation into the alleged crimes of Sidi Amar ould Daka, also known as Yoro, whom domestic and international security forces stated they suspected of ordering floggings and amputations while leading the "police force" of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa during the group's 2012-13 occupation of Gao.

Before making important decisions on potentially controversial national issues, for example the appointment this year of commissioners to the Truth, Justice, and

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Reconciliation Commission, the government consulted with the High Islamic Council, a group representing all significant Islamic groups, and the Committee of Wise Men, a group including the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bamako and Protestant and Muslim leaders.

The minister of religious affairs and traditions was responsible for promoting religious tolerance and coordinating national religious activities such as pilgrimages and religious holidays. The minister could prohibit religious publications he judged to defame another religion but did not exercise this authority during the year.

### **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors**

Violent extremist groups including Ansar al-Dine, AQIM, FLM, and al-Murabitoun, continued to carry out targeted attacks against security forces, peacekeepers, and civilians throughout the country and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of religion. For example, al-Murabitoun and the FLM both claimed responsibility for a November 20 attack on the Radisson Hotel in Bamako that killed 19 civilians. People held hostage during the event reported the assailants challenged victims to prove they were Muslim by reciting passages from the Quran – and killed those who could not. On August 10, unidentified militants beheaded the village chief of Tondo (near Timissa) in the Segou Region; the traditional leader had been involved in counter-jihadist outreach.

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

Muslim and non-Muslim religious leaders frequently and jointly condemned extremist interpretations of Islam. For example, in January religious leaders, including Muslims, Protestants, and Catholics, travelled to France to condemn violent interpretations of Islamic law, jointly called for peace among all Malians, and organized national prayers for peace.

Members of religious groups commonly attended the religious ceremonies of other religious groups, especially baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

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

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The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with government officials and highlighted the country's potential to use its history of religious tolerance to promote peace in the region. The embassy spoke with a wide range of religious leaders and human rights organizations. Embassy officials called on their interlocutors to advocate for tolerance and peace among religions and organized a number of activities to emphasize the importance of religious tolerance and freedom.

Some of the U.S. embassy's most widely shared social media postings this year included messages from the Ambassador on the occasions of Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha. These messages highlighted the country's role as a leader in the Muslim world, promoting a culture of tolerance and respect for diversity.

During Ramadan, embassy staff members reinforced the message of respect for religious diversity and tolerance by providing customary donations of rice and sugar to dozens of local mosques and Islamic associations throughout the country, including a donation to the High Islamic Council by the Ambassador.

Through a grant to a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), the U.S. embassy supported a partnership with the Ministry of Education to draft and produce over 16,000 copies of Arabic-language civic education textbooks for use in Arabic-language religious schools throughout the country. These textbooks, for students in grades 5 through 9, presented basic lessons on civic education, religious freedom, and tolerance of others – material which had previously been absent in these Arabic-language schools. A portion of the grant included training programs for instructors and administrators in how to use the textbooks to teach civic education.

The U.S. embassy organized and paid for a Ramadan visit by a U.S. university imam, who led Friday prayers for over 1,500 congregants at a local mosque in Bamako and delivered a sermon on the topic of "Islam's View on Peace and Reconciliation." At an iftar hosted by the Ambassador, the imam discussed religious tolerance with senior religious authorities and activists in local Islamic charities and NGOs, as well as the minister of religious affairs and traditions.

As part of his visit, the imam conducted a workshop organized in coordination with the High Islamic Council for approximately 150 imams on Islam's view on violent extremism and how imams as community leaders play a role and have an obligation to fight the ideology of extremism in local communities and mosques.

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He also spoke at the largest mosque in the country, delivering a Ramadan lecture on “Tolerance and Islam.” The embassy amplified the imam’s message via television, radio, and social media outreach in Bambara, French, English, and Arabic.