

MALI 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and grants individuals freedom of religion in conformity with the law. Following the August 2020 coup d'état, in September 2020, the transition government adopted the Transition Charter, which recognized the continued validity of the 1992 constitution's definition of the country as secular and prohibited religious discrimination under the law.

Following the May 24 consolidation of military power, the subsequent transition government also upheld the validity of these founding documents. The law criminalizes abuses against religious freedom. The transition government drafted a bill governing religious freedom and the exercise of worship; it was adopted as a draft law by the Council of Ministers on December 15. The request for full adoption and implementation of the law was pending with the transition government at the end of the year. This law would make the process of registering religious associations with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Worship, and Customs (MARCC) more transparent. On July 1, the transition government also adopted its 2021-25 national action plan for countering and preventing violent extremism and terrorism, which drew on data from religious groups.

Unidentified armed individuals continued to abduct individuals, including religious leaders, of all faiths or beliefs throughout the country. Religious leaders were often targeted for abduction for ransom due to their proximity to armed conflict and the high-profile nature of their work, according to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and experts. On October 9, captors released Colombian nun Sister Gloria Cecilia Argoti, abducted in February 2017 in Karangasso in the Koutiala Region by the al-Qa'ida affiliated terrorist group Jama'at Nasr al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). Abbot Leon Dougnon, a Catholic priest from the Bandiagara region, and Pastor Emmanuel Goita from Koutiala were also abducted and subsequently released between June and October. Individuals affiliated with terrorist organizations designated by the U.S. government used violence and launched attacks on civilians, security forces, peacekeepers, and others they perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam. According to a report published in August by the Human Rights and Protection Division (HRPD) of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) covering the period from April to June, terrorist and other armed groups publicly beat two women and a 16-year-old girl in the village of N'Doukala in the Segou Region because they refused to wear veils. The report also mentioned these groups prevented women from performing work outside their homes. Particularly in the

center of the country, JNIM continued to attack multiple towns in the Mopti and Segou Regions and to threaten Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious communities. Groups identified by authorities as extremist organizations continued to target and close government schools for their perceived “Western” curriculum. In the region of Mopti, especially in Koro, groups identified as extremists reportedly entered into verbal “peace” agreements with local populations, with stipulations that permitted the local population to move freely across the subdistrict of Koro and practice their faith in exchange for not challenging the groups’ territorial claims.

Muslim religious leaders continued to condemn what they termed extremist interpretations of sharia, and non-Muslim religious leaders condemned what they characterized as extremism related to religion. Some Christian missionaries again expressed concern regarding the increased influence in remote areas of organizations they characterized as violent and extremist. Representatives of the Catholic organization Caritas stated such organizations banned alcohol and pork and forced women of all faiths to wear veils in some parts of the region of Mopti. Caritas characterized these developments as signs of the growing influence of Islam in Mopti, which they believed threatened the Christian community. Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic leaders jointly called for peace and solidarity among all faiths at celebrations marking Christmas, the New Year, and Eid al-Fitr.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials discussed with religious leaders and human rights organizations the importance and long-held tradition of interfaith dialogue as a tool to bring peace to the country, and they underscored to these leaders their important role in promoting religious tolerance and freedom. The embassy supported programs to counter violent extremism related to religion and to promote tolerance, peace, and reconciliation. The embassy highlighted the work of Muslim frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in a call with the U.S. Secretary of State and met regularly with government officials charged with religious affairs and with representatives from religious minority associations operating in the country. In April, to commemorate the beginning of Ramadan, the Ambassador met with influential imams in Bamako, highlighting the role of religious leaders in confronting religious intolerance and promoting peace, and released a statement on the important role religious leaders play in society.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 20.1 million (midyear 2021). According to the MARCC, Muslims constitute an estimated 95 percent of the

population. Nearly all Muslims are Sunni, and most follow Sufism; however, one prominent Shia imam stated that as many as 10 percent of Muslims are Shia. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Christians, of whom approximately two-thirds are Catholic and one-third Protestant; groups with indigenous religious beliefs; and those with no religious affiliation. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) estimated its membership at approximately 100 individuals. Groups adhering to indigenous religious beliefs reside throughout the country, mostly in rural areas. Many Muslims and Christians also adhere to some aspects of indigenous beliefs. The MARCC estimates fewer than 1,000 individuals in Bamako and an unknown number outside of the capital are associated with the Dawa al-Tablig, a subgroup of Sunni Islam.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as a secular state, prohibits discrimination based on religion, and provides for freedom of religion in conformity with the law. Following the August 2020 coup d'état, in September 2020, the transition government adopted the Transition Charter, which recognized the continued validity of the 1992 constitution's definition of the country as secular and prohibited religious discrimination under the law. Following the May 24 consolidation of military power, the subsequent transition government also upheld the validity of these founding documents.

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 by up to five years' imprisonment or 10 years' banishment (prohibition from residing in the country). The penal code also states any religiously motivated persecution of a group of persons constitutes a crime against humanity. There is no statute of limitations for prosecuting such crimes.

The law requires registration of all public associations, including religious groups, except for groups practicing indigenous religious beliefs; however, registration confers no tax preferences or other legal benefits, and there is no penalty for not registering. To register, applicants must submit 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 leaders of the association, with signature samples

of three of the leaders. Upon review, if approved, the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization (MATD) grants the certificate of registration.

The MARCC is responsible for administering the national strategy for countering violent extremism, promoting religious tolerance, and coordinating national religious activities such as pilgrimages and religious holidays for followers of all religions.

The constitution prohibits public schools from offering religious instruction, but it permits private schools to do so. Privately funded madrassahs teach the standard government curriculum, as well as Islam. Non-Muslim students in these schools are not required to attend Islamic religious classes. Private Catholic schools teach the standard government curriculum and Catholic religious classes. Non-Catholic students in these schools are not required to attend Catholic religious classes. Informal schools, known locally as Quranic schools and which some students attend in lieu of public schools, do not follow a government curriculum and offer religious instruction exclusively.

The law defines marriage as secular. Couples who seek legal recognition must have a civil ceremony, which they may follow with a religious ceremony. A man may choose between a monogamous or polygamous marriage. The religious customs of the deceased determine inheritance rights, and civil courts consider these customs when they adjudicate such cases; however, many cases are settled informally.

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

Government Practices

According to numerous civil society organizations and UN reports, the transition government and security forces struggled to tamp down violence generated by the spread of groups they described as violent extremist organizations in the northern and central regions of the country, including terrorist groups and ethnically aligned militias. They stated that the presence of terrorist organizations and armed groups in the northern and central regions limited the transition government's capacity to govern and to bring perpetrators of abuses to justice, especially outside major cities.

In October 2020, the National Secretariat for the Prevention and the Fight Against Violent Extremism within the MARCC, with the assistance of the UN

Development Program, launched a study of factors influencing extremism related to religion. In July, using the results from the 2020 study, the transition government finalized a 2021-25 national action plan on countering and preventing violent extremism and terrorism that includes interfaith efforts and promotion of religious tolerance.

The Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission held its third and fourth public hearings on April 3 and September 18, respectively, covering cases relating to arbitrary arrest, forced disappearance, torture, and killings. All public hearings were broadcast on national television. As of December 8, the commission had heard the testimony of a total of 23,988 individuals since its launch in 2014, including cases involving religious freedom violations. Political events in the country, the COVID-19 pandemic, growing security concerns in the central and northern regions, a lack of transportation for victims, and the lack of access in camps for displaced persons limited the collection of testimony.

The transition government proposed a draft law on religious freedom and the exercise of worship. The draft law was adopted by the Council of Ministers on December 15, and the request for full adoption and implementation of the law was pending with the transition government at the end of the year. Once fully implemented, it would streamline the process of registering religious associations with the MARCC directly, rather than through the MATD.

In July, Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maiga and Minister of Religious Affairs, Worship, and Customs Mamadou Kone visited mosques as well as Catholic and Protestant churches in Bamako to pray for peace in the country, a successful transition period, and a fruitful rainy season. The MARCC, in coordination with Archbishop of Bamako Cardinal Jean Zerbo, organized the annual Catholic pilgrimage to Kita, which took place November 20-21. Cardinal Zerbo and Prime Minister Maiga took part in the pilgrimage, as did the Union of Young Malian Muslims (UJMA). As part of the pilgrimage, a UJMA representative marched from Kayes to Kita (approximately 250 miles) to demonstrate UJMA's support for interfaith dialogue. In September, the transition government funded the pilgrimage of at least 20 Protestants to Jerusalem. As of mid-December, the transition government had not resumed funding travel to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj pilgrimage due to limitations related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Caritas representatives and some Protestant leaders stated that although there were far fewer Christians than Muslims in the country, they did not experience unequal treatment by the transition government, and the government was adhering to the

constitutional requirement to treat all religions equally. Transition government officials from the MARCC continued to emphasize and cite that the constitution and government practices provide for the freedom to worship and practice any religion, including the freedom to not engage in religious practices. For example, in a speech during the Catholic pilgrimage to Kita, Prime Minister Maiga said all religions are essential to maintain social harmony, resolve conflict, and aid in the country's economic development.

Caritas expressed concern regarding what it termed the growing influence of Muslim religious leaders in the political field and in the transition government. For example, Caritas criticized the nomination of Imam Oumarou Diarra as deputy minister to the Minister of Social Development in Charge of Humanitarian Action, Solidarity, Refugees, and IDPs while retaining his title of imam. Caritas and the prosecutor for Bamako's Commune IV court criticized Diarra for attending a demonstration in August in his role as imam at the Bamako Camp I gendarmerie advocating for the release of imams who had been detained following a complaint.

The 121-member National Transition Council, the country's transition legislative body formed by the transition government in 2020, included three seats reserved for representatives of religious associations. One seat is filled by a Catholic, one by a Muslim, and one by a Protestant.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Throughout the year, mostly in the central and northern regions, domestic and transnational terrorist groups (including al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb and its affiliates Ansar al-Din, Macina Liberation Front, and al-Mourabitoune), united under the umbrella group JNIM, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISIS-GS), both U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations, continued attacks on domestic and international security forces, UN peacekeepers, civilians, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam. Both JNIM and ISIS-GS controlled significant territory in the northern and central regions. According to NGOs and security experts, armed groups in some instances coopted preexisting intercommunal and ethnic tensions to further sow instability and violence, and it was not possible to attribute some incidents entirely to religious motives. Several of JNIM's public messages repeated an intent to govern the country according to sharia.

In the center of the country, JNIM continued to attack multiple towns in the Mopti Region and to threaten Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious communities.

According to the August report of MINUSMA HRPD, from April to June, terrorist and other armed groups required women in the region of Segou to wear veils. According to the report, in N'Doukala, in the Segou Region, members of these groups publicly beat two women and a 16-year-old girl because they refused to wear veils.

Unidentified armed individuals continued to abduct individuals, including religious leaders of all faiths and beliefs, throughout the country. On June 21, unidentified armed individuals believed to be terrorists abducted Abbot Leon Dougnon, the priest of the Catholic Church of Segue in the Bandiagara region, along with four other Christians travelling from Bandiagara to Sevare in the Mopti Region. The four other individuals were released on June 23, while the abbot was held until July 13. On September 20, unidentified armed individuals believed to be terrorists abducted Pastor Emmanuel Goita near Koury in the Koutiala Region and released him on October 10. In March the remains of a Swiss Christian missionary, Beatrice Stoeckli, were identified. Stoeckli was abducted and had been held by JNIM since 2016. On October 9, JNIM released Colombian nun Sister Gloria Cecilia Argoti, held captive since February 2017.

Several influential imams and former government officials cautioned against divisive language that conflated certain ethnic groups, such as Fulani populations, with extremists. For example, following a terrorist attack on December 3 in the Bandiagara region that killed at least 32 persons, Dan Na Ambassagou, a Dogon self-defense militia operating in the central part of the country, issued a message demanding retaliation and calling for violence to be directed against the Fulani community. In response, Imam Mahmoud Dicko and Ousmane Bocoum (a Quranic teacher, civil society leader, and businessman from Mopti described as having a broad social media reach) condemned the attack and called for calm, tolerance, and peace.

According to the priest of Barapreli Church in the Bandiagara region, terrorist and other armed groups continued to ban Catholicism and instead teach Islam, impose sharia on Catholics, and force the local Christian community in Didja near the church to learn the Quran and perform prayers as prescribed by Islam. However, according to Caritas, most Catholic churches in the country remained open.

Islamist armed groups targeted and closed government schools that taught any curriculum not based on Islam. According to Caritas, the schools that closed in prior years due to threats or conflict did not reopen, and more schools closed throughout the year, especially in the Mopti Region. According to a June report

from the UN Secretary-General, as of June 1, the conflict had caused the closure of at least 1,595 schools in the north and central regions of Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu, Mopti, and Segou.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to Caritas, the Cadre for Action, Monitoring, Mediation, and Negotiation of Religious Denominations and Civil Society, which was formed as a mediation and negotiation network in 2020 in response to violent antigovernment protests, strengthened its ability during the year to operate effectively. The organization, composed of Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and civil society leaders, issued a joint statement on May 24 urging the transition government to work towards stability and peace following the consolidation of military power. The network routinely called for peaceful elections.

Some Christian missionaries again expressed concern regarding the increased influence in remote areas of organizations they characterized as violent and extremist, which the missionaries said could affect their ability to continue working in the country over the long term. Representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ said that their ability to travel throughout the country had grown severely limited due to reports of terrorist attacks. Caritas representatives reported that terrorist and other armed groups targeted persons throughout the country regardless of religious affiliation. They said, however, that priests in terrorist-controlled Minta in the region of Mopti remained able to carry out their normal functions without interference or threat. Protestant leaders noted the case of a Christian teacher who fled his home after being threatened by terrorists and members of armed groups in Mandiakoy village in Segou Region.

Caritas leaders expressed concern about the terrorist groups taking control of the subdistricts of Koro, Bankass, Bandiagara, and Douentza following agreements signed with the local population. These agreements afford decision-making and territorial authority to terrorist and other armed groups in exchange for not attacking the local population and allowing their freedom of movement throughout the territory. These leaders said they feared that terrorists would impose Islamic practices on those populations in the future. Caritas cited a ban on alcohol and pork in some parts of the region of Mopti as signs of the growing influence of Islam in these parts of the country, and which they viewed as a threat to the Christian community. MINUSMA HRPD and Caritas reported that terrorist and other armed groups imposed Islamic practices such as forcing women to wear veils

and collecting *zakat* (religious taxes) to pay for local services in the north and central regions.

Ousmane Bocoum continued spreading messages of tolerance. He held conferences with religious leaders and women as a way of countering what were termed radical ideologies most prevalent in the center of the country in an effort to bring peace to his community. With MINUSMA's support, Bocoum organized an awareness-building campaign for women religious leaders in Mopti on preventing violent extremism. In November, Bocoum concluded training on preventing violent extremism and radicalization for religious leaders, community workers, and radio announcers, also in Mopti.

While media reporting highlighted religious leaders' increasingly important role in politics, media reports also noted that religious activism was not a new phenomenon and, in many cases, they saw this activism as a sign of the country's tolerance for a plurality of religions.

According to a member of the UJMA, local Shia often faced discrimination from followers of different schools of Islam that perceive Shia practices to be incorrect.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The embassy continued to encourage the government to promote interfaith dialogue and to maintain a tradition of religious tolerance. The embassy also continued to highlight the importance of countering violent extremism related to religion, including through working with the MARCC to support programs with this goal. Embassy officials worked with vulnerable communities to build their ability to address conflict, radicalization, and religious violent extremism. For example, a civic engagement program held 15 capacity-building sessions on conflict management for more than 500 participants. These workshops allowed participants to improve their knowledge of mediation and conflict-resolution techniques.

The Ambassador and embassy officers spoke with a wide range of religious leaders and human rights organizations to promote religious tolerance and freedom, including Imam Mahmoud Dicko, members of the High Islamic Council and other imams, the Association of Muslim Women, Caritas, Protestant leadership, and

missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ. They urged religious leaders to advocate for tolerance and peace among various social and religious groups.

In August, in honor of Eid al-Adha, the U.S. Secretary of State held a virtual roundtable discussion with Muslim healthcare professionals working with marginalized communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, including Malian social worker Hawa Diallo. After a brief discussion between the Ambassador and Diallo, the embassy posted photographs and a statement on its Facebook page.

In April, to commemorate the beginning of Ramadan, the Ambassador met with influential imams in Bamako, highlighting the role of religious leaders in confronting challenges such as insecurity fueled by religious intolerance and in the promotion of peace through increased civic education.

The embassy highlighted the importance of tolerance and respect for religious diversity on its social media platforms throughout the year. In April, following a meeting with religious leaders, the Ambassador said in a written statement that religious leaders played an important role in creating a stronger, more democratic, and more stable country.