

# MALI 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and grants individuals freedom of religion in conformity with the law. In September, the transition government formed after an August military coup adopted the Transition Charter, which recognized the continued validity of the 1992 constitution that defined the country as secular and prohibited religious discrimination under the law. The law criminalizes abuses against religious freedom. The presence of groups identified by the government as violent extremist organizations and armed groups in the northern and central areas of the country limited government capacity to govern and bring perpetrators of abuses to justice, especially outside the main cities.

In October, kidnapers from Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), a U.S.-designated terrorist alliance, killed Swiss hostage Beatrice Stoeckli, a Christian missionary who had been held since 2016, according to the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs. An Italian priest was released by the group in October, along with three other hostages, in exchange for the release by the transition government of scores of suspected extremist prisoners. As of year's end, Colombian nun Sister Gloria Cecilia Argoti remained a captive of the group. Individuals affiliated with groups identified by authorities as extremist 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 on August 6 by the Human Rights and Protection Division of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, from April to June, extremist groups required women in the regions of Mopti and Timbuktu to wear veils. In the center of the country, JNIM continued to attack multiple towns in Mopti Region, 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, replacing them with Quranic schools. In the region of Mopti, especially in Koro, groups identified as extremists and local populations reportedly entered into verbal "peace" agreements, such as one prohibiting the sale of alcohol and pork to individuals of all religions, in exchange for security.

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, with Caritas representatives citing 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 a threat to the Christian community. They also raised concerns regarding the October prisoner release. Muslim, Protestant, and Roman Catholic religious leaders jointly called for peace and solidarity among all faiths at celebrations marking Christmas, the New Year, and Eid al-Fitr.

The U.S. embassy supported programs to counter violent extremism related to religion and to promote tolerance, peace, and reconciliation. The Ambassador and other officials discussed the importance of religious leaders helping bring peace to the country with religious leaders, as well as with human rights organizations. In March, the embassy released a video Ramadan greeting by the Ambassador on social media and sent letters to more than 40 mosques throughout the country highlighting the role of religious leaders in confronting challenges such as insecurity fueled by religious intolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 19.6 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to statistics from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship, 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. 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 Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship estimates fewer than 1,000 individuals in Bamako and an unknown number outside of the capital are associated with the Muslim group Dawa al-Tablig.

## **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. In September, the transition government formed after an August military coup

adopted the Transition Charter, which recognized the continued validity of the 1992 constitution that defined the country as secular and prohibited religious discrimination under 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 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 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 grants the certificate of registration.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship 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 *medersas* (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. Under the law, a man may choose between a monogamous or polygamous marriage. The law states that the religious customs of the deceased determine inheritance rights.

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**

The 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 armed religious groups, as well as ethnically aligned militias. The presence of groups, identified by the government as violent extremist organizations, and armed groups in the northern and central areas limited government capacity to govern and to bring perpetrators of abuses to justice, especially outside the main cities.

In October, the National Secretariat for the Prevention and the Fight Against Violent Extremism in the Ministry of Religions Affairs and Worship, with the assistance of the UN Development Program, launched a study of factors influencing extremism related to religion. According to the ministry, the evaluation results, which were not released by year's end, will form the basis of a new national action plan that includes interfaith efforts and promotion of religious tolerance.

A Moroccan-funded training program for 500 Sufi imams in Morocco, one objective of which was to improve interfaith tolerance, concluded in December 2019, with the fifth class of imams returning to the country.

The Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission launched in 2014 and renewed for an additional two years in 2019 continued operating during the year. In December 2019, the commission held its first public hearing, at which 13 victims of conflict recounted mistreatment they had suffered. The commission held a second public hearing on December 5 and heard cases ranging from abuses committed during a 1963 rebellion to 2019 mass killings in Ogossagou and Sobane Da. Both public hearings were broadcast on national television. As of December 16, the commission had heard the testimony of 3,329 individuals, compared with 5,324 in 2019, 3,592 in 2018, and 6,953 in 2017. Political events in the country, the COVID-19 pandemic, growing security concerns in the central and northern regions of the country, a lack of transportation for victims, and the lack of access in camps for displaced persons limited the collection of testimony. As of December 16, the commission reported it had collected more than 19,000 statements since it

had begun its work in January 2017, including cases involving religious freedom violations.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship organized, in coordination with Archbishop of Bamako Cardinal Jean Zerbo, the annual Catholic pilgrimage to Kita, which took place in November. Cardinal Zerbo took part in the pilgrimage, as did the Union of Young Malian Muslims (UJMA). A UJMA representative marched from Kayes to Kita (approximately 250 miles) to demonstrate UJMA's support for interfaith dialogue.

In November, the transition government announced the composition of a 121-member National Transition Council (its legislative body) that would include three seats reserved for representatives of religious organizations. The transition government's Vice President reviewed applications and selected members of the council. Following the release of the names in December, representatives of the Catholic Church criticized the fact that no representatives of the Church were accorded seats.

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

Throughout the year, mostly in the country's central and northern regions, domestic and transnational violent terrorist groups, including al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb and its affiliates Ansar al-Dine, Macina Liberation Front, and al-Mourabitoune, united under the umbrella group JNIM, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, continued to carry out attacks on domestic and international security forces, UN peacekeepers, civilians, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam. According to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and security experts, armed groups have, in some instances, co-opted pre-existing 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.

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In the center of the country, JNIM continued to attack multiple towns in Mopti Region, and to threaten Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious communities. According to a report published on August 6 by the Human Rights and Protection Division of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, from April to June, extremist groups required women in the regions of Mopti and Timbuktu to wear veils. According to the report, in Binedama, Mopti Region, members of extremist groups forced all women to wear a veil, while in Dianke, Timbuktu Region, extremist groups reportedly intimidated and threatened several unveiled women. In other areas, members of extremist groups reportedly told NGOs they could carry out their work only if their field teams did not include women, in compliance with a strict interpretation of Islam.

According to the 2020 Freedom House *Freedom in The World* report, armed extremists committed religious freedom abuses in the northern and central regions, attacking those who disagreed with their interpretation of Islam. According to the report, between 2012 and 2017, these groups kidnapped Christians, sometimes subjecting them to violent mistreatment.

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize some incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Several influential imams and former government officials cautioned against divisive language that conflated certain ethnic groups, such as Fulani populations, with extremists.

In June and July, in Koro and Bankass, perceived extremist elements reportedly prohibited the sale of alcohol and pork, including to non-Muslims, in exchange for security. According to a local church leader, extremists also threatened to ban the practice of Catholicism, teach Islam, and impose sharia on Catholics. The extremist elements later departed those areas and, as of October, had not returned. Most of the churches remained open.

According to a member of the UJMA, local Shia did not face discrimination from the government, but they often faced it from followers of different schools of Islam that perceive Shia practices to be incorrect.

According to a local NGO and videos released on social media, on April 20, armed individuals believed to be terrorists entered a market in the village of Sarafere, Timbuktu Region, and announced a ban on activities such as selling or buying tobacco. The armed group said these activities were not permissible under Islamic

law and threatened to return and kill anyone found with tobacco. The unidentified individuals also told the population to join them and leave behind their “hedonistic ways” or prepare “to kill or be killed,” according to local NGO representatives and videos.

Islamist armed groups targeted and closed government schools that taught any curriculum not based on Islam, replacing them with Quranic schools teaching a strict interpretation of Islam, according to NGOs and media reports. According to Caritas, the schools that closed due to threats or conflict did not reopen, and more schools were closed throughout the year, especially in Mopti Region.

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

In June and July, in response to violent antigovernment protests, Muslim, Catholic and Protestant interfaith leaders joined civil society leaders in creating a mediation and negotiation network called the Cadre for Action, Monitoring, Mediation and Negotiation of Religious Denominations and Civil Society. They jointly called for dialogue among the political parties to end the violence.

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. Caritas representatives said priests in Minta, Mopti Region, were surrounded by extremist elements, preventing them from free movement. According to Caritas, the expanding influence of what it described as violent extremist organizations, particularly in remote areas, increasingly threatened religious freedom in the country. Caritas representatives said they were concerned that the closure of government schools and opening of Quranic schools by what they termed extremist groups would negatively impact interreligious understanding and cooperation and could endanger Christianity in the country in the long term. Caritas representatives said the ban on alcohol and pork in some areas and attacks on some bars in Bamako on July 14 following negative messaging from Muslim religious leaders were also threats to religious freedom. Caritas also expressed concern regarding what it said was the growing influence of Muslim religious leaders in the political field.

Ousmane Bocoum, a local Quranic teacher, civil society leader, and businessman with a broad social media reach, continued spreading messages of tolerance as a way of countering radical ideologies and messaging spreading via social media and driving violence and instability, particularly in the center of the country. Bocoum

promoted religious freedom as a facilitator of youth programs and leader of a peacebuilding program in Mopti.

Following a January 21 workshop discussing the role of the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM) in countering conflict-related sexual violence, the president of the HCIM signed a declaration making commitments to prevent gender-based violence, including the issuance of a fatwa to denounce conflict-related sexual violence. In June and July, the Coordination of Movements, Associations, and Supporters of Imam Dicko joined other political and civil society organizations in demanding the resignation of then-President Keita and the dissolution of his government. According to press reports, Dicko, the former long-term head of the HCIM believed by many observers to have political ambitions, was seen as the “moral authority” of the opposition movement. In an August 29 television interview following the August 18 military overthrow of the Keita government, Dicko stated he planned to remain an imam and had “no ambition to be president” of the country.

While media reporting highlighted religious leaders’ playing an increasingly important role in politics, it also noted that religious activism was not a new phenomenon in the country, and largely attributed it to the demands of citizens on their religious leaders. 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, including through working with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship to support programs to counter violent extremism related to religion. Embassy officials worked with vulnerable communities to build their ability to address conflict, radicalization, and religious violent extremism.

The Ambassador and embassy officers spoke with a wide range of religious leaders and human rights organizations to promote religious tolerance, including Imam Dicko and other imams. They urged religious leaders to advocate for tolerance and peace among various social and religious groups.



In February, a visiting Muslim-American from New York discussed religious tolerance and diversity in the United States with students and young professionals, as well as the importance of religious tolerance in promoting peace and social cohesion and in combating violent extremism.

In March, the embassy released a video Ramadan greeting by the Ambassador on social media and sent letters to more than 40 mosques throughout the country highlighting the role of religious leaders in confronting challenges such as insecurity fueled by religious intolerance.

The embassy highlighted the importance of tolerance and respect for religious diversity on its social media throughout the year. In June, following a meeting with religious and civil society leaders regarding the country's political crisis, the Ambassador said in a televised statement that religious leaders played an important role in creating a stronger, more democratic, and more stable country.