

BURKINA FASO 2021 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. The government and religious authorities frequently stressed the importance of tolerance and social cohesion and warned against the messages conveyed by terrorist groups, who the government said were trying to divide the country. In August, the country's first terrorism-related criminal proceedings began in the capital. One of the five convicted defendants confessed to membership in Ansaroul Islam, a U.S. government-designated terrorist organization, and said he joined the group to "defend the Muslim religion." In October, senior government officials indicated the government was monitoring preaching that could promote violence or intolerance on social media using the National Observatory for Religious Information (ONAFAR). On August 8, President Roch Kabore attended the second annual congress of the Islamic Federation of Burkina Faso (FAIB), during which FAIB's president condemned terrorist acts, stating that, "Islam is a religion of peace and of respect for human life."

International media reported that terrorist groups, armed insurgents, and jihadists continued their campaign of violence and sometimes targeted places of worship or religious leaders. Domestic and transnational terrorist groups conducted more attacks and inflicted more violence against civilians than in the previous year, including numerous targeted killings based on religious identity, according to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Attackers killed or kidnapped imams, other clergy, and worshippers, while attacking and destroying mosques and churches. Although responsibility for many attacks in the country went unclaimed, observers attributed most to known terrorist groups Ansaroul Islam, Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISIS-GS), Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), all three designated by the U.S. government as terrorist organizations. Media reported numerous specific incidents of violence. An ambush on a group of villagers gathered for a Muslim naming ceremony on May 18 killed 15 Muslims in the Adjarara area of Oudalan Province. On April 11, violent extremists killed two persons in front of the mosque of Babonga, Yagha Province. On May 30, militants killed the imam of Bouli, in the Centre-Nord Region, along with his son, the village chief, and a member of the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland, an armed group established by the government during the year as additional support

for government security forces. On July 21, violent extremists killed a man in front of the mosque of Boudieri. In all these attacks the victims were believed to be Muslim. Media and international NGOs reported on violent enforcement by organizations characterized as extremist of the insurgents' interpretation of Islamic law in the region, with the threat of violence for noncompliance. For example, attackers forced members of communities in the northern part of the country to dress in specific "Islamic" garb, but observers noted this was also occurring across other areas of the country. Terrorists attacked and destroyed schools and killed teachers for teaching a secular curriculum and for teaching in French rather than Arabic, according to media reports. As of November 30, approximately 3,000 schools had been closed, depriving nearly 500,000 students of the ability to attend school.

Human rights organizations and religious groups continued to express concern that religiously targeted violence had harmed what they termed the traditional peaceful coexistence of religious groups in the country. Academic and other observers stated that there exists stigmatization of the mostly Muslim ethnic-Fulani community because of the community's perceived sympathy for those Islamists who are seen as militant, violent, and who recruited ethnic-Fulani to join related armed groups. This perception and activity aggravated existing societal tensions and posed a threat to stability. 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 as a common value, 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 FAIB, which conducted awareness campaigns throughout the country.

U.S. embassy officials discussed with a wide range of government agencies and officials, including the Office of the President, the continued increase in religiously motivated attacks, particularly in the Sahel and Est Regions. In addition, embassy staff met with religious leaders to encourage and promote values of religious freedom, interfaith tolerance, and active civil dialogue on these subjects. Throughout the year, the Ambassador met with imams and other Muslim leaders, and Catholic and Protestant leaders to reinforce U.S. support for religious freedom and tolerance, and to hear their concerns. During the year, the embassy also conducted regular outreach with religious figures and religiously oriented civil society organization leaders to understand current threats to religious freedom and

tolerance in the country as a result of the unprecedented level of violence against both Christians and Muslims.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 21.4 million (midyear 2021). 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 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 provides that all organizations, religious or otherwise, may register with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization (MATD), which oversees religious affairs. Registration confers legal status, and the process usually takes approximately three to four weeks and costs less than 50,000 CFA francs (\$86). Religious organizations are not required to register unless they seek legal recognition by the government, but after registration they must comply with applicable regulations imposed on all registered organizations or be subject to a fine of 50,000 to 150,000 CFA francs (\$86-\$260). The ministry, through the Directorate for Customary Affairs and Worship, helps organize religious pilgrimages; promotes and fosters interreligious dialogue and peace; develops and implements measures for the construction of places of worship and the registration of religious organizations and religious congregations; and monitors the

implementation of standards for burial, exhumation, and transfer of remains (which may include religious elements).

Religious groups operate under the same regulatory framework for publishing and broadcasting as other entities. MATD 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. MATD also reviews permit applications by religious groups.

The government generally does not fund religious schools or require them to pay taxes unless they conduct for-profit activities. The government, however, 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 also provides subsidies to registered Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim (commonly referred to as “Franco-Arabic”) schools for teacher salaries, which were typically less than those of public-school teachers. 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. 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 and thus their curricula are not reviewed.

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

Government Practices

During the year, security continued to deteriorate in the country, further weakening the government, according to media and experts. Following the terrorist attack that claimed the lives of 53 gendarmes in Inata (Sahel) on November 14, and a wave of civil society-led protests and demonstrations across the country, some peaceful and others violent, President Kabore appointed a new Prime Minister, and vowed to step up the fight against terrorism. According to sources, he reshuffled his cabinet

and military leaders in an effort to establish a more effective “fighting” government and to satisfy protesters. During a parliamentary session on November 26, the Ministers of Defense and Security stated that the majority of those attacking security forces were from the country (Burkinabe) and expressed concern that security forces were hampered by the actions of Burkinabe on the ground who cooperated with extremist groups.

From August 9-13, trials involving 10 defendants facing terrorism charges began in Ouagadougou, the country’s first terrorism-related criminal proceedings. One defendant was acquitted, five other defendants were convicted and sentenced to between 10 and 21 years in prison. The court had not concluded trial proceedings for the remaining four by year’s end. One convicted defendant confessed to membership in Ansaroul Islam, considered a terrorist organization by the government and a U.S. government-designated terrorist organization, responsible for prior violent and deadly terrorist attacks. The defendant said he joined the group to “defend the Muslim religion.” He stated in the proceeding that he considered it a legitimate act to attack and burn a school and rob staff members because “they don’t pray and they have no religion,” and because the school is a government institution. More than 900 defendants facing terrorism charges remained in custody pending trial at year’s end.

The government stated that terrorists attacked religious institutions with the aim of dividing the population. On many occasions, representatives of the government acted with a stated intent to counter this influence and foster peaceful cohabitation between communities and followers of various religions.

President Kabore attended the second annual FAIB congress on August 8, during which FAIB President El Hadj Zoungrana condemned terrorist acts, thanked everyone involved in the fight against terrorism, and stated that “Islam is a religion of peace and respect for human life.”

On May 13, in a celebration during Ramadan, which coincided with the Christian Ascension holiday, Minister of State and Interior Clement Sawadogo commended the religious communities in the country for what he stated were the peaceful coexistence they had demonstrated. “When I see that Cardinal Philippe Ouedraogo has left his own faith’s celebration of Ascension Day to come here to commune with Muslims, it serves as a powerful symbol, and represents an advantage for our country which we must preserve. All believers must live in harmony, in peace, in joy so that our country is always a haven for peace.”

On July 21, Minister of National Reconciliation and Social Cohesion Zephirin Diabre and Minister of State and Interior Minister Clement Sawadogo attended the Eid al-Fitr (known locally as Tabaski) prayer ceremony in Ouagadougou. Sawadogo said, “[T]he government, through our presence, intends to commune with all the Muslims of Burkina Faso on this blessed day of Tabaski. It is an opportunity for us to show the gratitude of the government for all your prayers for us and for our country.”

The government allocated 75 million CFA francs (\$129,000) each to the Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and animist communities, the same level as in previous years. Sources continued to state that this funding was meant to demonstrate equitable government support to all religious groups in the country.

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, such as the moral character of the person or group, lawful conduct of activities, and transparency in disclosing sources of income. Government officials indicated mosques had been closed as a result of application denials on moral grounds, but the central government does not maintain statistics on these closures.

On May 6, the government made a final decision to convey a disputed plot of land in Ouagadougou to FAIB for the construction of a mosque and community center to benefit the Muslim community. The government also committed to allocate a separate tract of land to the legal owner of the disputed land, a Christian. The parties had agreed to this arrangement, and according to Clement Sawadogo, Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, the government’s actions were intended to promote social cohesion and resolve tensions between Christian and Muslim communities resulting from the destruction of a mosque on the original plot of land in 2020. Some within the judiciary as well as some members of the Muslim and Christian communities stated they did not believe the government should involve itself in this legal matter. The Union of the Judiciary stated the ruling was “... a challenge to the independence and authority of the judiciary.”

In October, senior government officials indicated the government was monitoring preaching that could promote violence or intolerance on social media using ONAFAR. The MATD also announced the recruitment of a communication specialist to work on social media and strengthen the ONAFAR team.

The Director of Public and Political Freedoms within MATD stated in December that MATD was close to completing review of amendments to the law ensuring religious freedom for groups within the country's secular government framework.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Domestic and transnational terrorist groups continued to operate throughout the year and increased their killings of individuals based on their religious identity, according to media reports. These attacks forced more populations to flee their villages, bringing more communes under the groups' control, and preventing villagers from farming. The attacks spread to the south and west, the Cascades and the Boucle du Mouhoun Regions. Security experts stated that in the Est Region, terrorists/jihadis set up their own administrative structure requiring payment by the population of "zakat" or religious taxes. 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 again attributed most to three terrorist groups: Ansaroul Islam, JNIM, and ISIS-GS. Media reported that terrorist groups regularly targeted Muslim and Christian clergy, religious congregations, houses of worship, teachers, local government employees, and schools. According to local residents, terrorist groups were also responsible for killing imams whom the groups accused of collaborating with government security forces.

Media reported a number of attacks on places of worship, religious leaders, and religious services. Militants ambushed a group of villagers gathered for a Muslim naming ceremony on May 18 and during the attack killed 15 Muslim men in the Adjarara area of Oudalan Province. This attack was initially widely reported in international media as an attack on a Christian baptism, although sources later confirmed that all victims were Muslims, the international media reports being in error. Local media further suggested that the motive for the attack could have been reprisal for villagers having provided information to the government on the movements of armed militants through the area.

On April 11, militants killed two persons they had kidnapped 10 days earlier in front of the mosque of Babonga, Yagha Province.

On May 30, terrorists linked to the JNIM organization killed the imam of Bouli, in the Centre-Nord Region, along with his son, the village chief, and member of the state-sanctioned armed group the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland. Two others in a neighboring village were also killed.

On May 30, violent extremists kidnapped three Christian worshippers in Sanipenga during a church service in the Est Region.

On July 21, militants killed a man in front of the mosque of Boudieri; they had kidnapped the man nearly eight months prior on the road between Namagri and Boudieri in the Est Region. On July 29, suspected Islamic State – Greater Sahel (ISGS) militants kidnapped two persons in Bognori, a village in the Sahel Region. They took the two hostages to the village of Wouro Djama where they killed one in public in front of village's inhabitants, who were forced to watch. Afterwards, attackers threatened the villagers with similar treatment if they did not strictly follow Islam. All victims in these cases were Muslims.

According to the Ministry of Education, as of November 30, terrorist violence forced nearly 3,000 schools to close, depriving nearly 500,000 children of education. Minister of Education Stanislas Ouaro expressed concern that school closures had spread to parts of the country formerly free of violent extremist activity, particularly in the Cascades and Sud-Ouest Regions. 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 other services. According to many observers, attacks also targeted Muslims whom they said the attackers believed were insufficiently rigorous in their practice of Islam.

Attacks against Christians forced some to adopt new practices in their religious observance to avoid violent extremists, according to media, NGOs, and the government. Members of the Parish Saint Paul of Sandikpenga in the Est Region learned of threats to their church building and rescheduled a planned Mass for Pentecost. An arson attack destroyed the church later that day. Local residents indicated the church subsequently closed and church leaders told members to pray in their homes until further notice.

Evangelical Christian pastor Aristar Lankoande, a member of the International Missionaries Society (IMS), reported that as of November 8, 552 evangelical churches had closed in the Est Region, and IMS had sent 422 of its pastors to minister elsewhere. Church members in the region were also encouraged to instead pray in their homes.

On March 4, militants disrupted the celebration of life ceremony practiced in traditional religion for a deceased villager in Kodjema, in Gnagnan Province.

On March 6, attackers forcibly entered the village of Souloungou, also in the Gnagnan Province, and told the local population they would be forced to adopt Islamic dress and other religious traditions. This was one of several reported incidents of armed groups forcing local populations to adopt the practice of Islam according to their standards under threat of violence.

On April 29, violent extremists attacked the village of Solmonre in Sanmatinga Province during an iftar celebration, firing shots into the air and setting several houses on fire, including the local chief's. Much of the village's population subsequently fled the area.

On May 3, militants stopped a passenger bus in traveling between Diapaga and Fada, claiming they were searching for security forces. They then ordered the passengers not to get involved in conflicts between violent extremists and security forces and to adopt and practice Islam according to their standards.

On May 4, ISGS militants attacked the villages of Menzourou and Kaltewoute in the commune of Tin-Akoff, in Oudalan Province, Sahel Region. They killed the son of a marabout (Muslim religious teacher) in Menzourou and burned down several houses before retreating into the countryside.

On May 7, suspected JNIM militants took control of Douma in the commune of Tangaye, 28 miles from Ouahigouya in the Nord Region and forced the closure of schools unable to meet their demand for teaching in Arabic.

On May 20, nearly 160 militants suspected of belonging to the Katiba Macina group (an Ansar al Dine affiliate) invaded the village of Douma in the Nord Region, demanding that the women wear a veil and threatening to kill husbands whose wives did not comply. They also ordered men to adopt specific dress and grooming standards, including wearing short pants and growing beards. On May

25, militants forced populations at Tankougounadie-centre in the Sahel Region to do the same and adopt sharia.

On June 1, the populations of several predominantly Muslim villages in Tapoa Province were forced to flee after militants threatened them with violence if they did not follow certain commands. These included outlawing any religions besides Islam, forcing young people to marry, prohibiting the use of alcohol, banning the breeding of farm animals they considered offensive under Islam, and requiring villagers to join their fight.

On June 4, a video circulated widely online depicted three victims of an attack in Deou, Sahel Region, whose right hands had been amputated, allegedly by ISGS-linked militants. In the video, the victims were accused of robbery and the amputations were the punishment meted out under sharia, the first such reported incident in the country.

On June 6, suspected ISGS militants forcibly entered Lonadeni, a village in the Est Region, and threatened to kill anyone who engaged in indigenous religious practices.

On Sept. 15, a Catholic priest reported to local media that his local diocese had been forced to close a parish after violent extremists invaded its community and threatened non-Muslims with violence, forcing local clergy to flee mainly to Gaoua in the Sud-Ouest Region. He also reported that several towns in the region were unable to celebrate the Catholic feast of the Assumption out of fear of an attack by violent extremists.

On October 15, militants allegedly linked to Katiba Macina forced the closure of four schools in the villages of Gosson, Daka, Yankore et Bossoum in Sourou Province when they refused to adhere to their religious demands and teach in Arabic.

On October 25, unknown individuals destroyed an animist religious idol in the city of Orodara, which was meant to bless local families.

On November 4, a widely circulated video depicted the amputation by violent extremists of the hand of a young man accused of theft.

On Christmas Eve, priests, catechists, and some worshippers from the Parish of Titao, in the Lorum province, Nord Region, were forced to flee, helped by security

forces, to avoid being attacked by jihadis. “This is the first time in 50 years that we did not celebrate Christmas at Titao,” stated Father Victor Ouedraogo, the manager of the Research Center for Interfaith and Social Dialogue (CRDIS) at Ouahigouya in the Nord Region.

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 predominantly Muslim Fulani ethnic community because of a perceived association with militant Islamist groups. They said this aggravated social tensions in some regions, since self-defense militias at times exacted vigilante justice on Fulani communities in the northern and central regions of the country because of this perceived connection to militant and terrorist groups.

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 as a common value, 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 FAIB, 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 social and economic development activities with the goal of reducing vulnerability to terrorist recruitment and fostering religious tolerance between the communities.

In January, the Catholic Archbishop of Ouagadougou, Cardinal Philippe Ouedraogo, denounced terrorist violence, calling it “an evil for humanity.” Ouedraogo also said he feared how jihadist and terrorists attacks were challenging social cohesion. He said, “Fundamentalism is gaining ground, due to the misinterpretation of the holy book. We already see tensions, as evidenced by fundamentalist signs including within religions...” He added, however, that Protestants, Muslims, and Catholics had met together with the Mogho Naba, a powerful traditional chief of the predominantly Muslim Mossi ethnic group, who had assisted in addressing and reducing such tensions. Describing the closure of three of the six parishes of the Diocese of Dori in the Sahel Region, Ouedraogo

said, “All priests, sisters, and worshippers have fled” to Kaya (Centre-Nord Region). The Archbishop discussed his initiative to promote interfaith dialogue through the annual Christian-Islamic and interethnic couples pilgrimage to the Marian shrine of Notre Dame de Yagma near Ouagadougou, taking place in February, the second time for this pilgrimage.

Pastor Henry Ye, the President of the Federation of Evangelical Churches and Missions (FEME), stated that religious dialogue and tolerance was valued among religious leaders in the country, but observed that the broader religious community did not yet embrace this spirit at the same level. To counter pressures toward radicalization and violent extremism among youth in particular, he noted that the FEME held regular exchanges over social media among youth organizations of religious groups. Ye also described how acts of terrorism affected churches. For instance, all FEME-related churches in Yagha Province, Sahel Region were closed. Pastor Lankoande Isaie of the Assembly of God said that one group of violent extremists agreed not to close churches in Tapoa, Est Region, as long as members did not raise pigs or brew beer, and the men grew beards and wore short trousers.

Religious leaders continued to express their view that the foundation of interfaith dialogue in the country helped them resist and survive various crises over time, including the threat and challenge to interreligious and ethnic cohesion posed by terrorism. They said the government often called upon them for assistance in resolving socioeconomic tensions including a case involving destruction of a mosque in 2020 on disputed land, and tensions regarding the length of closure of places of worship during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another case involved a protest and attack at FAIB headquarters regarding the perceived prolonged closure of a mosque, to which the government responded by reopening the mosque.

As in previous years, new Muslim and Protestant congregations continued to form without approval or oversight from existing Muslim and Protestant federations. Religious leaders stated the messages of tolerance by 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 federations’ views. 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.

On February 4, FAIB leaders cited the growing social stigmatization of their wives when they wear a veil. El Hadj Oumarou Zoungrana, then president of FAIB, also described FAIB’s newly-established National Technical Committee, charged with

reviewing sermons for content promoting violence in sermons and speeches by imams, and reprimanding the offenders.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials raised the continued increase in religiously motivated attacks, particularly in the Sahel, the Nord, the Ouest, the Sud-Ouest, and Est Regions, with government officials, including those in the MTAD, the Ministries of Defense and Security, and the Office of the President. Embassy staff regularly discussed events and policies affecting religious freedom with the MATD, and the Director General for Traditional Beliefs, which included discussing the equitable registration process for religious groups, a draft of a pending law on religious freedom, the equitable treatment of religious groups by the government, and the status of the relationship between the government 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. During these meetings with religious leaders throughout the year, many discussed with the Ambassador the impact of the current violent extremism on the country's tradition of peaceful coexistence of religious groups

On January 22, the Ambassador met with Cardinal Ouedraogo to discuss his views on needed support from the international community to end terrorist violence in the country.

On February 17, the Ambassador visited the headquarters of FEME and discussed with FEME leaders their views of the consequences of violent extremism on interreligious and intrareligious tensions, and the spread of ethnic division.

On January 27, the Ambassador hosted a roundtable with representatives of religious associations and NGOs working on interfaith dialogue. Participants suggested that giving more such opportunities to voices of persons supporting interfaith dialogue would promote increased social cohesion. One young participant working in the Sahel explained how he used the WhatsApp network to link with youth from 13 regions across the country to promote interfaith dialogue. "The idea is to train people including imams and other religious leader to be part of social media" in this effort.

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 continued funding 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.

The embassy provided the Association for Religious Tolerance and Interfaith Dialogue a \$35,000 grant for activities such as advocacy, awareness campaigns, public messaging, community inclusion efforts, and conflict prevention.

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.