

# **DJIBOUTI 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but mandates equality for persons of all faiths. Religious groups must register with the government, which conducts lengthy background checks as part of the registration process. Foreign religious workers must obtain a work permit and purchase annual residency cards. The government maintained its authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including assets and personnel of all mosques. The government continued to closely regulate all mosques and provide imams with the scripts for their Friday sermons. The government continued to mandate a civic and moral education course based on Islam for all students in public schools as well as in private schools run by non-Muslim religious organizations.

Norms and customs discouraged conversion from Islam. Muslim and Christian religious leaders noted traditional social networks often ostracized converts from Islam.

U.S. embassy officials met with government officials to discuss continued equitable treatment of religious groups, especially in refugee camps. Embassy officials also met with religious leaders to discuss their perception of government attitudes towards religious practice.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 938,000 (midyear 2021), of which 94 percent is Sunni Muslim. According to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Shia Muslims, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Jews, Baha'is, and atheists constitute the remaining 6 percent. Non-Muslim populations are generally concentrated in Djibouti City and include foreign-born citizens and expatriates.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates the registered refugee population at 34,000, of whom 42 percent are from Somalia, 37 percent from Ethiopia, 18 percent from Yemen, and 3 percent from Eritrea. Refugees are both Muslim and non-Muslim, but no data exists on their religious breakdown.

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

## Legal Framework

Islam is the religion of the state, according to the constitution. The constitution mandates the government respect all faiths and guarantees equality before the law, regardless of one's religion. The law does not impose sanctions on those who do not observe Islamic teachings or who practice other religious beliefs. The constitution prohibits religiously based political parties.

The Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs, renamed in May as the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs, has authority over all Islamic matters and institutions, including mosques, religious events, and private Islamic schools. Imams are civil service employees of the ministry; the government owns mosque properties and other assets. The ministry's High Islamic Council vets all Friday prayer service sermons.

The President swears an Islamic religious oath.

The government requires all foreign and domestic religious groups to register by submitting an application to the Ministry of Interior, which conducts a lengthy background investigation of the group. The investigation reviews group leadership, religious affiliation, sources of finance, and the group's objectives within the country. Ties to religious groups considered extremist, strong political agendas, and relations with unfriendly foreign nations are factors that could cause a group's application to be rejected. Domestic and foreign Muslim religious groups must also inform the High Islamic Council at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs of their existence and intent to operate. Muslim and non-Muslim foreign religious groups must also gain approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to operate in the country. Once approved, every foreign religious group signs a one-year agreement detailing the scope of its activities, and its workers must obtain work permits and purchase annual residency cards. Foreign religious groups must submit quarterly reports to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and renew their agreements every year. The quarterly report details activities, origin of funding for activities, and scope of work completed, and it identifies beneficiaries. Religious groups may not operate in the interim while awaiting registration.

Muslims may bring personal status matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance either to family courts, whose code includes elements of civil and Islamic law, or to civil courts. Civil courts address the same matters for non-Muslims. Citizens are officially considered Muslims if they do not specifically

identify with another religious group. Cases in family courts, referred to as sharia courts, have two stages. The complainant first brings the grievance to the neighborhood council (*qadi*), which either issues a judgment or transmits the case to the family court. If the complainant is not satisfied with the decision of the *qadi* or the family court, he or she may appeal to the court of first instance of the family court or the supreme Sharia Council.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs and the Ministry of Education jointly oversee the curricula and teacher certification of approximately 40 Islamic schools, except for two religious schools run by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the country, which follow the Saudi curriculum. Other international schools are permitted to offer their own curriculum. The public school system is secular and offers no courses on specific religions; religion in general is taught, along with other subjects. Private schools run by religious organizations must offer a civic and moral education course based on Islamic principles to all students, including non-Muslims.

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

### **Government Practices**

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs continued to oversee all Islamic matters during the year. The government continued to provide imams with their Friday sermons, and the imams were not permitted to stray from the script. A ministry representative stated that government control and oversight of mosques was necessary to preclude political activity from mosques and counter foreign “extremist” influence.

The government continued to permit registered non-Islamic groups, comprising Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches, to operate freely, according to Christian leaders. Muslim citizens were permitted to enter Christian churches, although societal pressure continued to discourage conversion. There were no limitations on the importation of religious literature for registered non-Islamic groups. No other Christian or non-Christian groups were legally recognized by the government during the year, although the Church of Scientology maintained its registration as a commercial entity. The government subsidized the cost of utilities at some church properties of registered non-Islamic groups, since it considered some church properties to be part of the national patrimony. Religious groups not registered with the government, including the Ethiopian Protestant and non-Sunni Muslim congregations, continued to operate without government

sanction. Observers stated these groups and other religious minorities hosted worship gatherings in private homes due to small numbers and usually at night, in part because of reduced police presence at that time.

In October, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs published the first-ever translation of the Quran into the regional Afar language, a project that brought together Afar-speaking religious leaders from Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Eritrea and was funded by Saudi Arabia.

The government continued to allow non-Islamic religious groups to host events and proselytize on the groups' private property. The government continued to permit a limited number of Christian missionaries to sell religious books and pamphlets at a bookstore in Djibouti City.

The government continued to issue visas to foreign Islamic and non-Islamic clergy and missionaries but required them to belong to registered religious groups before they could work in the country or operate nongovernmental organizations. The number of foreign religious workers was relatively small during the year, estimated at 20-30. The government continued to require foreign religious leaders to regularize their status by purchasing an annual residency card for 24,000 Djiboutian francs (\$140).

Observers continued to say it would be practically impossible for a non-Muslim to achieve a high position in government service.

Local public schools continued to observe only Islamic holidays, but, under the direction of the Ministry of Education, schools in refugee camps continued to permit students of other religious groups to miss class for their respective religious holidays. The ministry continued work on revising the national curriculum, including reforming civic and moral education courses to promote religious inclusivity.

The government continued to implement a civic and moral education course, based on Islamic principles, in public schools across the country. According to a Christian religious leader, private schools run by non-Muslim religious groups were required to teach the Islam-focused course.

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

Societal norms and customs discouraged conversion from Islam, but conversions reportedly occurred, particularly for marriages with non-Muslim partners. An Islamic leader stated that Muslim women were less likely to marry outside the Islamic faith due to societal pressures. Both Muslim and Christian leaders stated conversion from Islam was detrimental to a person's social status; Muslim religious leaders said traditional social networks often ostracized converts from Islam.

One imam noted the possibility that unregistered religious groups could spread a message of extremism or religious intolerance as had happened in the mid-2000s, although he said the Muslim community had actively worked since then to ensure such messages did not become widespread.

A Christian leader noted that although societal religious tolerance is high in the country, with members of different religious groups living side by side without friction, religious leaders rarely came together to discuss issues and potential common responses to social concerns, such as poverty or food insecurity.

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

Embassy officials met with officials from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Waqfs to discuss continued equitable treatment of religious groups, especially in refugee camps. Embassy officials also met with religious representatives to discuss their perceptions of government attitudes towards religious practice and to note any changes.