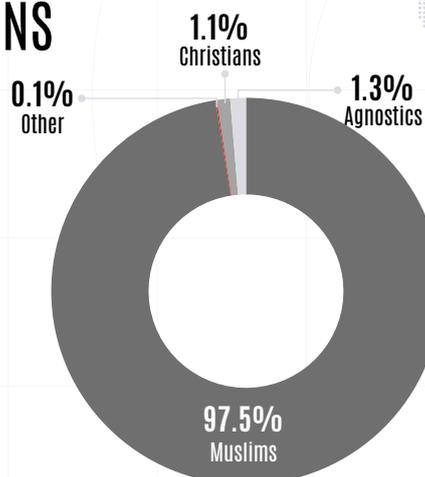




# DJIBOUTI

## RELIGIONS



Population

**999,899**

GDP per capita

**2,903 US\$**

Area

**23,200 Km<sup>2</sup>**

GINI INDEX\*

**41.6**

\*Economic Inequality

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Djibouti is a “democratic, sovereign, one and indivisible Republic”, and all its citizens are equal “without distinction of language, of origin, of race, of sex or of religion” (Article 1). However, the majority religion, Islam, is playing a greater role in Djiboutian society as evidenced by changes to its status in the constitution itself. In the 1992 version,<sup>1</sup> Islam was recognised as the state religion in the preamble; now it is given pre-eminence as Article 1 in the revised 2010 version.<sup>2</sup>

Under Article 6 of both versions of the constitution, political parties are prohibited from “identify[ing] themselves to a race, to an ethnicity, to a sex, to a religion, to a sect, to a language or to a region.” Article 11 guarantees that everyone has “the right to freedom of thought, of conscience, of religion, of worship and of opinion [and] respect for the order established by the law and the regulations”.<sup>3</sup>

The constitution does not explicitly prohibit proselytising, but it is forbidden to proselytise in public.<sup>4</sup> The laws do not punish those who do not abide by Islamic

rules or profess another religion. According to Caritas, the Catholic Church is not allowed to evangelise in the country, but it can engage in social outreach activities.<sup>5</sup>

A decree passed in 2014 gives the Ministry of Islamic Affairs broad powers over the country’s mosques and the content of public prayers.<sup>6</sup> Its authority covers all Islamic affairs, from mosques and private denominational schools (over which the Ministry of Education also has jurisdiction), to religious events. Imams have become civil servants, official employees of the Ministry. For the government, this is intended to prevent political activities in mosques, to allow the authorities to monitor their activities, and to limit foreign influence.<sup>7</sup> Since the decree came into effect, almost all mosques have a government-appointed imam.<sup>8</sup> The public education system is secular, but there are about 40 private Islamic schools.<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of whether they are local or foreign, non-Muslim religious groups are required to register with the authorities. Applications are reviewed by the Ministry of the Interior and provisional permits, pending completion of the review, are not granted. By contrast, Muslim groups are merely required to notify the Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs of their existence.

They are not required to register, nor are they subject to review by the Ministry of the Interior. Foreign groups, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, also need the permission of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before they are permitted to operate in Djibouti.<sup>10</sup>

The head of state takes an Islamic oath of office.<sup>11</sup>

Muslims can turn to either family courts or civil courts to settle issues related to marriage, divorce or inheritance. Family courts contain elements of civil and Islamic law. For non-Muslims, such issues come solely under the remit of civil courts.<sup>12</sup> For non-Muslims, family matters too are governed by state civil courts; civil marriages, for example, are granted by these courts to locals as well as to foreigners. The government recognises non-Muslim religious marriages if an official document issued by the organisation that performed the marriage is presented.<sup>13</sup>

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

In May 2019, President Ismail Omar Guelleh authorised medical treatment for Sheikh Abdulqadir Mumim, an imam associated with the Islamic State (Daesh) in Somalia.<sup>14</sup>

In November last year, the country's largest mosque, the Abdulhamid II Mosque, was inaugurated, paid for by Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs.<sup>15</sup> The government also allowed the construction of a second Christian cemetery just outside Djibouti City.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike in previous years, the authorities did not discipline extremist imams during this period.<sup>17</sup>

For the first time, the Ministry of Education allowed refugees to celebrate their holy days during the regular school calendar; normally, local schools usually only celebrate Islamic holidays. The Ministry also encouraged religious inclusivity through changes in the school curriculum.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to previous years, the government started requiring foreign missionaries to "regulate their status through purchasing a residency card for 24,000 Djiboutian francs (\$140)" and to provide proof of belonging to a registered religious group.<sup>19</sup>

Christian communities continued to report that people who convert to Christianity face discrimination in education and employment, while Muslim religious leaders

noted that traditional social networks usually "ostracized converts from Islam".<sup>20</sup> Religion is not taught in public schools.

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Djibouti's strategic location makes it a preferred host for foreign military bases, including those of the United States, France, Italy and China, plus troops from Spain and Germany.<sup>21</sup> This foreign military presence serves to counter violent extremism from the region,<sup>22</sup> especially Somalia's al-Shabaab. However, its location also makes it a destination point for refugees fleeing violent conflicts in the region. This can cause problems if refugees are not well integrated. This is particularly important in a country with a high level of unemployment.<sup>23</sup>

Independent since 1977, this former French colony is still experiencing tensions between its main ethnic groups, the majority Issa and the Afar, while Islamic extremism too is growing. Relations between Muslims and Christians have deteriorated in recent years at the expense of interreligious dialogue.<sup>24</sup> More recently, the country has seen the arrival of refugees, especially from Yemen,<sup>25</sup> and is playing a major geostrategic role with China<sup>26</sup> building its first overseas base. Saudi Arabia too has expanded its influence in the country.<sup>27</sup>

Djibouti is a possible target for al-Shabaab because of its participation in the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM). Al-Shabaab had previously issued public threats against the country.<sup>28</sup> The future is uncertain and the future of freedom of religion is uncertain in Djibouti.

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