



Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **97.4%**
- Christians : **1.2%**
- Agnostics : **1.2%**
- Others : **0.2%**

900.000

23.200 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Djiboutian society and Islam are today more closely intertwined from a political-institutional standpoint than under the original constitution in 1992. In the first sentence of Article 1 of the constitution of 1992, Djibouti described itself as a “democratic Republic”.^[1] This version was revised in 2010. The preamble now begins with the words “In the name of God All-Powerful”, while Article 1 says: “Islam is the Religion of the State.”^[2]

Some fundamental freedoms are granted to other religions. Under Article 1, all citizens are equal, “without distinction of language, of origin, of race, of sex or of religion”. Under both versions of the constitution, political parties are prohibited from “identify[ing] themselves [with] a race, to an ethnicity, to a sex, to a religion, to a sect, to a language or to a region” (Article 6). Article 11 guarantees for every person “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”^[3] In theory, the constitution does not explicitly prohibit proselytising. Nor do the laws provide for the punishment of those who do not abide by Islamic rules, or who profess another religion.

A law passed in October 2012 gives the Ministry of Islamic Affairs broad powers over the country’s mosques and over the content of public prayers. The ministry’s authority covers all Islamic affairs, from mosques to private denominational schools (over which the Ministry of Education also has jurisdiction) to religious events.^[4] According to statements by government officials, this is intended to prevent political activities in mosque communities, give the government greater controls and limit foreign influence.^[5] In addition to its secular public education system, there are about 40 private Islamic schools in Djibouti.^[6]

Implementation of the law, however, has been slow. Fewer than half of all mosques in Djibouti have state-appointed imams in place, as required by law.^[7]

Regardless of whether they are from within the country or from abroad, non-Muslim religious groups are required to register with the authorities. Registration applications are followed by a longer review by the Ministry of the Interior. Provisional permissions, pending completion of the review, are not granted. Muslim groups are merely required to notify the Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs of their existence. They are not required to register, nor are they subject to reviews 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.^[8]

The head of state takes a religious oath of office.^[9]

Djibouti's legal codes also contain elements of Islamic law. Islamic courts resolve matters of civil and family law for Muslims. These courts apply Islamic law along with civil law.^[10]

For non-Muslims, family matters are governed by state civil courts, so civil marriages are permitted to these individuals as well as to foreigners. The government recognises non-Muslim religious marriages if an official document issued by the organisation that performed the marriage can be presented.^[11]

Incidents

While social norms and customs in Djibouti do not provide for the renunciation of Islam, conversions do occur. For instance, it was reported that in the Markazi refugee camp populated by Yemeni refugees a resident who had converted to Christianity was subject to intimidation and insults by his fellow refugees.^[12]

According to recurrent reports, converts sometimes face certain consequences such as workplace discrimination.^[13] Representatives of Christian denominations also report acts of vandalism against churches by individuals and destruction of Church property.^[14]

In some cases, unregistered religious communities, including Ethiopian Protestants and certain Muslim congregations, operate under the auspices of other, registered communities. Smaller communities, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Baha'is, are said to carry out their activities in secret without registering.^[15]

In recent years, Djibouti has increasingly become a haven for refugees escaping war in Yemen, which is located 20 to 30 kilometres beyond the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. With its very limited resources, the Catholic Church of Djibouti has provided support for the small number of Catholics from Yemen.^[16] The Church also helps in local development, including health care.^[17]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Powerful countries in the world contrast Djibouti's stability with the troubled situation in the surrounding region. However, in Djibouti too many people suffer from a lack of political freedom.^[18] The family of incumbent President Ismail Omar Guelleh has been in power since the country gained independence from France in 1977. Guelleh was elected to a fourth term in elections held in April 2016. Opposition candidates have had little scope to upset the status quo. The situation of press freedom in the country is also dire. The organisation Reporters Without Borders strongly criticised the government for arresting BBC journalists and expelling them from the country. Djibouti is near the bottom of that NGO's press freedom index: 170th out of 180.^[19] The restrictive and, at times, discriminatory treatment of all non-Islamic religious communities is a clear limit to the latter's ability to profess their faith.

Indications suggest that the government wants to keep the country away from conflicts of any kind, religious ones

included. By making the country widely available as an international military base, the government is increasing its revenue. Recognising Djibouti's strategic location on the Gulf of Aden,^[20] China opened its first military base in the country in July 2017. The terms of the lease permit the stationing of up to 10,000 Chinese soldiers at the site. The US has long been present in Djibouti, with its only permanent military base in Africa situated in the country. France, the former colonial power, and Italy have bases in the country; Germany and Spain have troops in Djibouti^[21] Saudi Arabia is currently building a military base there as well.^[22]

Leasing these facilities brings in hundreds of millions of dollars to the treasury of Djibouti each year. There is reason to suggest that Djibouti's international importance as a military base and the resulting income for the country may act as a counterbalance against extremism, thus ensuring freedom of religion at least to some degree.^[23]

Endnotes / Sources

[1] Constitution de Djibouti du 4 septembre 1992, World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/fr/dj/dj002fr.pdf>, (accessed 28th March 2018).

[2] Djibouti's Constitution of 1992 with Amendments through 2010, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Djibouti_2010.pdf?lang=en), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Djibouti_2010.pdf?lang=en

[3] Ibid.

[4] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Djibouti', International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 28th March 2018).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] 'Jemen: Tausende von afrikanische Flüchtlingen sitzen fest', Radio Vatikan, 10 April 2015, http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/04/10/jemen_tausende_afrikanische_fluechtlingen_sitzen_fest/1135807, (accessed 12th February 2018)

[17] 'AFRICA/DJIBOUTI – HIV awareness programs in Catholic schools', Agenzia Fides, 2 December 2016, http://www.fides.org/en/news/61292-AFRICA_DJIBOUTI_HIV_awareness_programs_in_Catholic_schools, (accessed 12th February 2018).

[18] Cf. Dietmar Pieper, 'How Djibouti Became China's Gateway To Africa', Spiegel Online, 8 February 2018,

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/djibouti-is-becoming-gateway-to-africa-for-china-a-1191441.html>, (accessed 12th February 2018).

[19] Friederike Müller-Jung, 'Dschibuti: Kein Machtwechsel in Sicht' , Deutsche Welle, 6. April 2016, <http://www.dw.com/de/dschibuti-kein-machtwechsel-in-sicht/a-19168501>, (accessed 12th February 2018).

[20] Dietmar Pieper, op. cit.

[21] Abdi Latif Dahir, 'How a tiny African country became the world's key military base', Quartz, 18 August 2018, <https://qz.com/1056257/how-a-tiny-african-country-became-the-worlds-key-military-base/>, (accessed 28th March 2018).

[22] 'Djibouti welcomes Saudi Arabia plan to build a military base', Middle East Monitor, 28 November 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171128-djibouti-welcomes-saudi-arabia-plan-to-build-a-military-base/>, (accessed 28th March 2018).

[23]Munzinger Archiv 2018, <https://www.munzinger.de/search/start.jsp>, (accessed 27th March 2018).