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Gambia, The

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 4,361 square miles and a population of 1.6 million. Sunni Muslims constitute more than 90 percent of the population. The vast majority is Maliki Sufis; the main orders represented are Tijaniyah, Qadiriya, and Muridiyah. Sufi orders pray together at common mosques. Members of the Ahmadiyya order, and a small percentage of other Muslims, predominantly immigrants from South Asia, do not ascribe to any traditional Islamic school of thought.

An estimated 9 percent of the population is Christian, and less than 1 percent practices indigenous animist religious beliefs. The Christian community, situated mostly in the west and south, is predominantly Roman Catholic; there are also Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of various evangelical denominations. There is a small group of Baha'is and a small community of Hindus among South Asian immigrants.

Intermarriage between Muslims and Christians was very common. In some areas, Islam and Christianity syncretize with animism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The constitution establishes Qadi courts in such places as the chief justice determines. The two Qadi courts sit in Banjul and Kanifing. Their jurisdiction applies only to marriage, divorce, and inheritance questions for Muslims where they apply traditional Islamic law. In 2007 the government established a five-member Qadi appeals panel to deal with appeals against decisions of the Qadi courts and district tribunals that relate to Shari'a (Islamic law).

The Supreme Islamic Council is an independent body that advises the government on religious issues. Although the government does not have representation on the council, it provided the council with substantial funding. The minister of religious affairs (a role President Jammeh filled during the reporting period) maintained a formal relationship with the council.

Government meetings and events typically commenced with two prayers, one Islamic and one Christian. The government often invited senior officials of both religious groups to open major government events with prayers.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Maulid al-Nabi (the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad), Good Friday, Easter Monday, Assumption Day, Koriteh (Eid al-Fitr), Tobaski (Eid al-Adha), Yaumul Ashura (the Islamic New Year), and Christmas. The president, a devout Muslim, celebrates Christmas each year with a state Christmas dinner.

The government does not require religious groups to register. Faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must meet the same registration and licensing requirements as other NGOs.

The government permits religious instruction in schools. Both public and private schools throughout the country provide Biblical and Qur'anic studies without government restriction or interference. The government funded religious instruction in public schools, but this instruction was not mandatory.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The Inter-Faith Group for Dialogue and Peace, comprised of representatives of the Christian, Muslim, and Baha'i communities, continued to meet regularly to discuss matters of mutual concern such as religious freedom and the need to live together in harmony. Some groups such as Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Church of Christ the Redeemer were not part of the Inter-Faith Group.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The embassy also maintained contact with religious leaders of different faiths and denominations and invited them to embassy functions, such as an iftar (evening meal during Ramadan), which the ambassador hosted during the Muslim month of Ramadan.

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