



## **Gambia, The**

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2008**

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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 period covered by this report.

There were a few isolated reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

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 1.7 million. Sunni Muslims constitute more than 90 percent of the population. The vast majority are Malikite Sufis, of which the main orders represented are Tijaniyah, Qadiriya, and Muridiyah. Sufi orders pray together at common mosques. Members of the Ahmadiyya order are also represented, while a small percentage of 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 practice indigenous animist religious beliefs. The Christian community, situated mostly in the west and south, is predominantly Roman Catholic; there are also Protestant groups including Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and various small 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 is common. In some areas, Islam and Christianity are syncretized with animism.

#### **Section II. Status of 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 law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Constitution establishes Cadi courts in such places as the chief justice determines. The two Cadi courts sit in Banjul and Kanifing. Their jurisdiction applies only to marriage, divorce, and inheritance questions for Muslims. The Cadi courts apply traditional Islamic law.

The Government observes Tobaski (Eid al-Adha), Yaomul Ashura (the Islamic New Year), Maulid al-Nabi (the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad), Koriteh (Eid al-Fitr), Good Friday, Easter Monday, Assumption Day, and

Christmas as national holidays.

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 funds religious instruction in public schools but this instruction is not mandatory.

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

#### *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 period covered by this report.

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

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

### **Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

There were a few isolated reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

In May 2008 the chairman of the Inter-Faith Group for Dialogue and Peace, a Muslim imam, said the group had concluded their investigation into the April 2007 attack on a Catholic priest in Brikama and found that the attack was carried out by independent "troublemakers" without any involvement by the imam of a nearby mosque. According to the chairman, both Muslim and Christian leaders in the community decided to put the incident behind them. The Catholic Mission agreed that the community had decided to move on, but maintained the imam from the mosque had been involved.

In December 2007 the U.S. affiliate of a Nigerian evangelical Christian group Christ for Humanity reported unprovoked mistreatment by their Muslim neighbors, including stone-throwing at their compound outside Banjul, with some stones breaking through the tin roof of their main building. Police investigated the stone-throwing incident and plainclothes officers observed the next service.

The Inter-Faith Group for Dialogue and Peace, comprising representatives of the Christian, Muslim, and Baha'i communities, continued to meet regularly to discuss matters of mutual concern such as religious freedom, tolerance, and the need for people of different religious groups 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.

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