

THE GAMBIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

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

The U.S. embassy regularly engaged with government officials, religious groups, and religious leaders concerning religious tolerance and the importance of respect for religious freedom. Embassy officers encouraged religious group leaders to cooperate.

Section I. Religious Demography

The Bureau of Statistics estimates the population to be 1.74 million. Sunni Muslims constitute more than 90 percent of the population. The majority is Malikite Sufi and the main orders represented are Tijaniyah, Qadiriya, and Muridiyah. Small numbers of immigrants from South Asia are Shafi'i Sunnis. Sufi orders pray together at common mosques. There are also small numbers of non-Sufi Muslims, including members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community.

An estimated 9 percent of the population is Christian. Most Christians are Roman Catholic. There are also Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and a number of evangelical groups. Less than 1 percent of the population is Bahai or practices indigenous animist religious beliefs. There is a small community of Hindus among South Asian immigrants and business persons.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The constitution establishes Qadi courts, with Muslim judges trained in the Islamic legal tradition, in such places as the chief justice determines. The Qadi courts sit in

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each of the country's seven regions and apply traditional Islamic law. Their jurisdiction applies only to marriage, divorce, and inheritance questions for Muslims. A five-member Qadi appeals panel deals with appeals against decisions of the Qadi courts and district tribunals relating to Islamic law.

The Supreme Islamic Council is an independent body that advises the government on religious issues. Although not represented on the council, the government provides the council with substantial funding. The minister of religious affairs maintains a formal relationship with the council.

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 Quranic studies without government restriction or interference. The government funds religious instruction in public schools, but this instruction is not mandatory.

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.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

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 president, a Muslim, delivered an annual Christmas message to the nation and also delivered messages for major Muslim feasts.

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.

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The Interfaith Group for Dialogue and Peace, comprised of representatives from the Muslim, Christian, and Bahai communities, met regularly to discuss matters of mutual concern, such as religious freedom and the need to live together in harmony. The Interfaith Group did not include some groups such as Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and the Church of Christ the Redeemer.

Intermarriage between Muslims and Christians was common.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy regularly engaged with government officials and religious leaders and encouraged continued respect for religious freedom and tolerance. U.S. embassy officers maintained regular contact with leaders of religious groups, and participated in a number of outreach activities throughout the year. Religious leaders were included in the embassy's representational functions. The first event hosted by the new ambassador was an iftar.

Embassy officers continued to engage religious leaders on issues regarding interfaith harmony, U.S. religious diversity, and the importance of religious freedom. The ambassador attended religious events of all principal religious groups, such as the ordination of the new Methodist bishop. In meetings with religious leaders, embassy officers promoted religious tolerance and respect.