Lebanon

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and the freedom to practice all religious rites, provided that the public order is not disturbed. The Constitution declares equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference but establishes a balance of power among the major religious groups. The Government generally respected religious rights; however, there were some restrictions, and the constitutional provision for apportioning political offices according to religious affiliation may be viewed as discriminatory.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. At the same time, the Government took some steps to improve religious freedom, including the Ministry of Interior's February 11, 2009 circular, allowing citizens to remove their religious affiliations encoded on national identity cards.

There were periodic reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There was tension among religious groups, attributable to competition for political power, and citizens continued to struggle along sectarian lines with the legacy of a 15-year civil war (1975-90). Despite tensions generated by the competition for political power, places of worship of every confession continued to exist side by side, extending a centuries-long national heritage as a place of refuge for those fleeing religious intolerance.

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 4,035 square miles and a population of 4 million. Because parity among confessional groups remains a sensitive issue, a national census has not been conducted since 1932. However, the most recent demographic study conducted by Statistics Lebanon, a Beirut-based research firm, showed 28 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, 28 percent Shi'a Muslim, 21.5 percent Maronite Christian, 8 percent Greek Orthodox, 5 percent Druze, and 4 percent Greek Catholic. Over the past 60 years, there has been a steady decline in the number of Christians as compared to Muslims, mostly due to emigration of large numbers of Maronite Christians and a higher than average birth rate among the Muslim population. There are also very small numbers of Jews, Baha'is, Mormons, Buddhists, and Hindus.

Of the 18 officially recognized religious groups, 4 are Muslim, 12 Christian, 1 Druze, and 1 Jewish. The main branches of Islam practiced are Shi'a and Sunni. The Alawites and the Isma'ili ("Sevener") Shi'a order are the smallest Muslim communities. The Maronite community, the largest Christian group, has had a centuries-long affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church but has its own patriarch, liturgy, and ecclesiastical customs. The second largest Christian group is the Greek Orthodox Church, principally composed of ethnic Arabs who maintain a Greek-language liturgy. Other Christians are divided among Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox (Jacobites), Syriac Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, Evangelicals (including Protestant groups such as the Baptists and Seventh-day Adventists), and Latins (Roman Catholic). The

Druze, who refer to themselves as al-Muwahhideen, or "believers in one God," are concentrated in the rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut. Divisions and rivalries among various groups date back many centuries, and while relationships among religious adherents of different confessions were generally amicable, group identity was highly significant in most aspects of cultural interaction.

Many persons fleeing religious mistreatment and discrimination in neighboring states have immigrated to the country, including Kurds, Shi'a, and Chaldeans from Iraq, as well as Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan. According to the Secretary General of the Syriac League, 50,000 Iraqis have immigrated to Lebanon since 2003, and approximately 5,000 Coptic Christians live in Lebanon.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and the freedom to practice all religious rites, provided that public order is not disturbed. The Constitution requires the state to respect all religious groups and denominations and guarantees respect for the personal status and religious interests of persons of every religious sect. The Constitution declares equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination or preference, but stipulates a balance of power distributed among the major religious groups. The Government generally respected these rights in practice; however, there were some restrictions, and the constitutional provision for apportioning political offices according to religious affiliation may be viewed as inherently discriminatory.

In most cases, the Government permits recognized religious groups to administer their own family and personal status laws, such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. The "Twelver" Shi'a, Sunni, Christian, and Druze confessions have state-appointed, government-subsidized clerical courts that administer family and personal status law. However, many of these laws discriminate against women. For example, Sunni inheritance law provides a son twice the inheritance of a daughter. Although Muslim men may divorce easily, Muslim women may do so only with the concurrence of their husbands.

The Constitution provides that Christians and Muslims be represented equally in Parliament, the Cabinet, and high-level civil service positions, which include the ministry ranks of Secretary General and Director General. It also provides that these posts be distributed proportionally among the recognized religious groups. The constitutional provision for the distribution of political power and positions according to the principle of religious representation is designed to prevent a single confessional group from gaining a dominant position. The "National Pact" of 1943 stipulates that the president, prime minister, and speaker of parliament be Maronite Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shi'a Muslim, respectively. This distribution of political power operates at both the national and local levels of government.

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement, which ended the country's 15-year civil war, reaffirms this arrangement but, significantly, mandates increased Muslim representation in Parliament so that it is equal to that of the Christian community and reduces the power of the Maronite Christian presidency. In addition, the Ta'if Agreement endorses the constitutional provision of appointing most senior government officials according to religious affiliation. This practice functions in all three branches of government. The Ta'if Agreement also stipulates a cabinet with power equally allocated between Muslims and Christians. The political establishment has been reluctant to change this "confessional" system, because citizens perceive it as critical to the country's stability.

Formal recognition by the Government is a legal requirement for religious groups to conduct most religious activities. A group that seeks official recognition must submit a statement of its doctrine and moral principles for government review to ensure that such principles do not contradict popular values or the Constitution. The group

must ensure that the number of its adherents is sufficient to maintain its continuity.

Alternatively, religious groups may apply for recognition through recognized religious groups. Official recognition conveys certain benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religion's codes to personal status matters. An individual may change religions if the head of the religious group the person wishes to join approves of this change. Refusal is not reported to occur in practice. Religion is generally encoded on national identity cards and noted on *ikhraaj qaid* (official registry) documents, and the Government complies with requests of citizens to change their civil records to reflect their new religious status.

Some religious groups do not enjoy official recognition, such as Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and unregistered Protestant Christian groups. These groups are disadvantaged under the law in that their members do not qualify for certain government positions, but they are permitted to perform their religious rites freely. For example, a Baha'i cannot run for Parliament as a Baha'i candidate because there is no seat allocated for the confession, nor could such an individual hold senior positions in the Government, since these are also allocated on a confessional basis. However, a number of members of unregistered religious groups are recorded in government records under recognized religions. For example, most Baha'is are registered under the Shi'a sect. A member of the Baha'i community can therefore run for office and fill a seat allocated to the Shi'a sect. Similarly, Mormons are registered under the Greek Orthodox faith. Government decisions on granting official recognition of religious groups do not appear to be arbitrary.

Government documents refer to Jewish Lebanese citizens as Israelis, even though they are not Israeli citizens. In April 2009 Interior Minister Ziad Baroud submitted a proposal to the cabinet to amend legislation by referring to "Jewish Lebanese" citizens instead of "Israelis."

Unrecognized groups may own property and assemble for worship without government interference; however, they are disadvantaged under the law because legally they may not marry, divorce, or inherit property in the country. Therefore, these religious groups may choose to register as part of other known religious organizations. For example, Protestant evangelical churches are required to register with the Evangelical Synod, a nongovernmental advisory group that represents those churches with the Government. It is self-governing and oversees religious matters for Protestant congregations. Representatives of some churches complained that the Synod has refused to accept new Protestant groups into its membership since 1975, thereby crippling their clergy's ability to minister to the members of those communities.

Many families have relatives who belong to different religious communities, and intermarriage is not uncommon; however, intermarriage is difficult to arrange in practice between members of some groups. Shari'a, which applies to personal status matters of Muslims, forbids the marriage of a non-Muslim man to a Muslim woman. Druze religious leaders will perform marriages only of Druze couples. There are no procedures for civil marriage; however, the Government recognizes civil marriage ceremonies performed outside the country.

There are no legal barriers to proselytizing; however, traditional attitudes of the clerical establishment strongly discourage such activity.

The leadership councils for Christians and Druze nominate candidates for their respective senior clerical posts. However, the nomination of Sunni and Shi'a muftis is officially endorsed by the Government's Council of Ministers, and they receive monthly salaries from the Government. The Government appoints and pays the salaries of Muslim and Druze ecclesiastical judges. The leaders of other religious groups, such as Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics, do not receive salaries from the Government.

The Government does not require citizens' religious affiliations to be indicated on their passports. Following the

Ministry of Interior's February 11, 2009 circular, citizens are not required to have their religious affiliation encoded on national identity cards or ikhraaj qaid documents, and citizens were able to remove their religious affiliation from their civil registry records during the reporting period. The ikhraaj qaid, a civil document that indicates personal status information, can be presented by citizens instead of an identity card when they apply for various purposes, such as to obtain government employment or to enroll in or be employed at a university.

Article 473 of the Penal Code stipulates a maximum prison term of one year for anyone convicted of "blaspheming God publicly." There were no prosecutions reported under this law during the reporting period.

The Government permits the publication in different languages of religious materials of every registered religious group.

The Government recognizes the following holy days as national holidays: Armenian Christmas, Eid al-Adha, St. Maroun Day, Islamic New Year, Ashura, Good Friday, Easter (both Western and Eastern rites), the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, All Saints' Day, Feast of the Assumption, Eid al-Fitr, and Christmas. The Government also excuses Armenian public sector employees from work on St. Vartan Day.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement calls for the eventual elimination of political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence"; however, little progress has been made in this regard. Representatives from the lesser represented, or “minority,” Christian groups, such as Syriac Christians, stated that the Government discriminated against them because no one from their religious classifications has been appointed a minister. While they have served in some high-level civil service positions, such as Director General, these groups state that most positions are filled by Maronites and Greek Orthodox. These groups further stated that while their population numbers 54,000, they are allocated only one representative in Parliament.

Religious workers not working under the auspices of a government-registered religious organization and found to be working while on tourist visas are deemed to have violated their visa status and are consequently deported.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no confirmed reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On February 11, 2009, the Minister of Interior issued a circular allowing citizens to remove their confessional identity from their civil registry records if they wish to do so. Citizens were able to remove their religious affiliation from their civil registry records during the reporting period.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were periodic reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Following the July-August 2006 conflict with Israel and continuing throughout the year, tensions between the democratically elected government of Fouad Siniora and the antigovernment opposition led by Hizballah resulted in greater political tension among religious groups. While this political climate contributed to periodic reports of tension and occasional confrontations between religious groups during the reporting period, most of this activity could be attributed to political differences and the legacy of the civil war.

During the reporting period, Hizballah directed strong rhetoric against Israel and its Jewish population. Moreover, anti-Semitic literature was published and distributed with the cooperation of Hizballah. Media outlets such as Al-Manar TV, which is controlled and operated by Hizballah, and NBN TV, which is affiliated with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, broadcast anti-Semitic material and drew no government response.

Representatives from the Israeli Communal Council, the legally registered Jewish organization, reported continued acts of vandalism committed against a Jewish-owned cemetery in downtown Beirut.

During the reporting period, there were examples of Maronite religious leaders attempting to prevent evangelical Christians from proselytizing to other Christians and Druze religious figures hindering Maronite missionary efforts.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government actively promotes religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy advances this goal through contacts at all levels of society, public remarks, embassy public diplomacy programs, and the funding of relevant projects. The Ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with leaders of religious communities and regularly discussed matters related to religious freedom and tolerance. The U.S. Government supports the principles of the Ta'if Agreement, and embassy staff regularly discuss the issue of sectarianism with political, religious, and civic leaders.