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Senegal

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

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

There were 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 76,000 square miles and a population of 12.8 million. Islam is the predominant religion, practiced by approximately 94 percent of the population. Most citizens belong to one of several Sufi brotherhoods and practice a syncretic form of Islam that incorporates indigenous cultural beliefs and values. There is also an active Christian community, constituting 4 percent of the population, which includes Roman Catholics, Protestant denominations, and syncretic Christian-animist groups. The remaining 2 percent practices exclusively indigenous religious beliefs and values or no religion.

The country is ethnically and religiously diverse. Although there is significant integration of all groups, Muslims are concentrated in the north, Christians are in the west and south, while groups who practice indigenous religious beliefs live mainly in the east and south.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The constitution specifically defines the country as a secular state and provides for the free practice of religious beliefs, provided that public order is maintained.

Unlike members of other religious groups, Muslims may choose Islamic-based laws under the family code to govern marriage and inheritance. Civil court judges preside over civil and customary law cases, but many disputes among Muslims are settled informally by the decision of religious leaders, particularly in rural areas.

The government provides direct financial and material assistance to religious organizations, primarily to maintain or rehabilitate places of worship or to underwrite special events. All religious groups have access to these funds, and there is often competition among religious groups to obtain them.

The government encourages and assists Muslim participation in the annual Hajj, providing hundreds of free airplane tickets to citizens for the pilgrimage. The government provides similar assistance for an annual Catholic pilgrimage to the Vatican and the Holy Land.

Religious organizations are independent of the government and administer their affairs without government interference. The civil and commercial codes require any group, religious or otherwise, to register with the minister of interior to acquire legal status as an association. Registration enables an association to conduct business, own property, establish a bank account, and receive financial contributions from private sources. Registered religious groups and registered nonprofit organizations are exempt from many forms of taxation. The government generally approves applications for registration, and the Ministry of Interior must have a legal basis for denying applications.

Religious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must obtain authorization to operate from the Ministry of Women, Family, and Social Development. The government monitors foreign religious NGOs to ensure that their activities adhere to their stated objectives.

The government allows up to four hours of voluntary religious education per week in public elementary schools. Parents may choose either the Christian or Muslim curriculum. An estimated 700,000 students participated in religious education during the reporting period.

Private schools may also provide religious education. The Ministry of Education provides partial funding of schools operated by religious institutions that meet national education standards. Long-established Christian schools with strong academic reputations receive the largest share of this government funding. The majority of students attending Christian schools are Muslim. In addition to the national curriculum, Christian schools offer religious education to Christian students and moral education to non-Christians. Non-Christian students were not required to take Christian religious courses.

In addition to secular public schools, the government also operates Islamic schools, which are growing in popularity and include an estimated 60,000 students. By the end of the reporting period, the government had opened 200 of the 600 Islamic schools planned. All of these schools are bilingual, teaching in French and Arabic. This program has removed thousands of children from street begging and exploitation under the guise of some Qur'anic schools in the country.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Tabaski (Abraham's sacrifice), Tamkharit (Muslim New Year), the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Korite (end of Ramadan), Easter Monday, Ascension, Pentecost, Feast of the Assumption, All Saints' Day, and Christmas.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

The government provided facilities to ease access and parking at the Saint-Lazarre cemetery in Dakar, resolving concerns expressed in 2008 about its plan to expropriate part of the cemetery to erect office buildings.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

On June 21, an evangelical Christian church in Pikine Tally Bou Bess, a suburb of Dakar, was reportedly attacked by a group of youth during a worship service. Two days prior to the attack, neighbors had complained that the church's celebrations were noisy. The attack resulted in slight damage to church property, but no one was injured. Following the attack, the pastor filed a formal complaint with local police. The case was pending at the end of the reporting period.

During the reporting period, Christian and Muslim leaders worked together to promote and maintain a public dialogue.

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.

Through the embassy's speakers program, International Visitor Leadership Program, U.S. Government Program Alumni Association, and other public outreach tools and events, the embassy promoted religious pluralism and dialogue between religious groups. Embassy officials also met with religious leaders to promote tolerance and mutual understanding as well as enlist their support for development and human rights goals.

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