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Senegal

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 76,000 square miles and a population of 12.5 million. Islam is the predominant religion, practiced by approximately 94 percent of the population. Most citizens practice a syncretistic form of Islam; they belong to one of several Sufi brotherhoods and combine Islamic practices with 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 syncretistic 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

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

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 can choose Islamic-based laws contained in the family code to govern marriage and inheritance. Civil court judges can preside over civil and customary law cases, but many disputes were transferred to religious leaders for adjudication, particularly in rural areas.

The government provided 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 was often competition among religious groups to obtain them.

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

Religious organizations are independent of the government and administer their affairs without government interference. The civil and commercial codes required any group, religious or otherwise, to register with the minister of interior to acquire legal status as an association. Registration enabled 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 were exempt from many forms of taxation. The government generally granted registration, and the minister of interior must have a legal basis for refusing registration.

Religious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) obtained permission to operate from the Ministry of Women, Family, and Social Development. The government monitored foreign religious NGOs to ensure that their activities adhered to their stated objectives.

The government allowed four hours of religious education per week in state owned elementary schools. The religion taught was based on the parents' preference, whether Christian or Muslim. An estimated 700,000 students participated in these voluntary programs during the reporting period.

Private schools were free to provide religious education. The Ministry of Education provided funds to schools operated by religious institutions that meet national education standards. Christian schools, which have long and successful experience in education in the country, received the largest share of this government funding. The majority of students attending Christian schools are Muslim. In addition to the national curriculum, Christian schools offered religious education to Christian students and moral education to non-Christians. Religious charities also received government support.

The government also operated Islamic schools, which were growing in popularity and included an estimated 60,000 students. During the reporting period, 40 new elementary schools were opened throughout the country; 10 middle schools were also created. All of these schools were bilingual, teaching in French and Arabic. This program has removed thousands of children from street begging and exploitation. In 2008 citizens requested 600 new Islamic schools; however, the government lacked the funding and capacity to fulfill the high demand.

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

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.

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

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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. Christian and Muslim leaders continued to maintain a public dialogue. During the year they worked together to help diffuse social crises and promote dialogue to resolve political tensions between the government and the opposition.

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, the International Visitor Leadership Program, calls to religious leaders, U.S. government Program Alumni Association, editorials, digital video conferences, and other public outreach tools and events, the embassy promoted religious pluralism and open dialogue between religious groups. Embassy officials also made several visits to all religious authorities of the country to promote tolerance and mutual understanding as well as to enlist their support for a range of development issues.

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