



Gambia, The

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

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.

There was one report of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious belief or practice; most prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues 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 1,641,600. Sunni Muslims constitute more than 90 percent of the population. The vast majority are Malikite Sufis, of which the main orders represented are Tijaniyah, Qadiriyyah, Muridiyyah, and Ahmadiyya. Except for the Ahmadiyya, Sufi orders pray together at common mosques. 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 of the country, is predominantly Roman Catholic; there are also several Protestant groups including Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and various small evangelical denominations. There is a small group of followers of the Baha'i Faith 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. There are few atheists in the country.

Foreign missionary groups operate in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. There is no state religion.

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 matters of marriage, divorce, and inheritance that involve Muslims. The Cadi courts apply classic Maliki fiqh (Islamic law).

The Government considers the following religious holy days to be national holidays: Tobaski (Eid al-Adha), Yaumul 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 Day.

The Government does not require religious groups to register. Religiously based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must meet the same registration and licensing requirements as other NGOs.

The Government permits and does not limit 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

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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 was one report of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. Most prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

In April 2007 a group of Muslim worshippers in Brikama allegedly tried to attack a Catholic priest. The incident, which may have been led by a police officer, took place when Muslims conducting afternoon prayers at the police station mosque were disturbed by noise from the nearby Catholic Church. There were conflicting accounts about what precipitated the attack: the noise or the priest's Nigerian nationality. In addition, some reports said the priest injured himself while barricading his office against the group, while other reports said the group beat the priest. Accounts also conflicted widely about the role the presiding imam played in either instigating or attempting to prevent the attack.

The Government swiftly took action on the incident and an investigation was pending at the end of the reporting period. The Christian Council and the Supreme Islamic Council conducted reconciliation efforts and reinforced their messages of religious harmony and tolerance.

Intermarriage between members of different religious groups is legal and socially acceptable.

The Inter-Faith Group for Dialogue and Peace, comprising representatives of the Christian, Muslim, and Baha'i communities, met 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. The chairman of the group was reportedly conducting his own investigation of the April incident in Brikama but made no statement by the end of the reporting period.

Practitioners of female circumcision in the country believed that Islam mandates the practice and its surrounding rites. However, in May 2007, 18 female circumcisers agreed to abandon the practice in a highly publicized ceremony attended by the Health Minister as part of an NGO-led campaign against female genital mutilation (FGM). Although the Government's official stance was that female circumcision is a cultural issue that the Government cannot forbid, government programs to promote girls' education and development quietly worked to reduce the prevalence of FGM by changing societal attitudes. In addition, the Children's Bill, aimed at curbing violence against children, outlaws "social and cultural practices that affect the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of the child and in particular, those customs and practices that are (1) prejudicial to the health and life of the child and; (2) discriminatory to the child on the grounds of sex or other status."

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy also met with religious leaders of several denominations at embassy functions, including iftar dinners, where the Embassy promoted religious freedom as a specific objective.

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