



Gambia, The

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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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 during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to 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 its population is approximately 1,641,600. Sunni Muslims constituted more than 90 percent of the population. The vast majority were Maliki Sufis, of which the main orders represented were Tijaniyah, Qadiriyyah, Muridiyyah, and Ahmadiyah. Except for the Ahmadiyah, all Sufi orders prayed together at common mosques. A small percentage of Muslims, predominantly immigrants from South Asia, did not ascribe to any traditional Islamic school of thought.

An estimated 9 percent of the population was Christian, and less than 1 percent practiced indigenous animist religions. The Christian community, situated mostly in the west and south of the country, was predominantly Roman Catholic; there were also several Protestant denominations including Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and various small Protestant evangelical denominations. There was a small group of followers of the Baha'i Faith and no significant Jewish population.

Intermarriage between Muslims and Christians was common. In some areas, Islam and Christianity were syncretized with animism. There were few atheists in the country.

Foreign missionary groups, representing mostly small denominations from Nigeria and Sierra Leone, operated 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 classical Maliki fiqh (Islamic law).

The Government considered the following religious holidays as national holidays: Tobaski (Eid al-Adha), Yaomul Ashura (the Muslim New Year), Maulid al-Nabi (the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad), Koriteh (Eid al-Fitr), Good Friday, Easter Monday, Assumption Day, and Christmas Day. Religious holidays did not affect negatively any religious group.

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

The Government permits and does not limit religious instruction in schools. Biblical and Qur'anic studies are provided in both public and private schools throughout the country without government restriction or interference. Religious instruction in public schools is provided at government expense but is not mandatory.

Government meetings and events typically commenced with two prayers, one Islamic and one Christian. Senior officials of both religious groups were often invited to open major government events.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

In several interviews, Catholic and Anglican bishops praised the Government and people of the country for the friendly protection and accommodation of the Christian minority. The Gambian Christian Council, an organization consisting of clerical leaders of the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist churches, discussed matters of importance to Christians in the country.

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

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Inter-marriage 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 regularly to discuss matters of mutual concern.

Practitioners of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the country firmly believed that Islam mandates the practice and its surrounding rites. Although government programs to promote girls' education and development quietly worked to reduce the prevalence of FGM by changing societal attitudes, the Government's official stance was that female circumcision is a cultural issue that the Government cannot forbid. In June 2005 the National Assembly passed the Children's Bill, aimed at curbing violence against children, that 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. In particular, the U.S. embassy sought opportunities to send religious leaders to the United States on International Visitor Programs.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)