U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Lebanon

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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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 these rights; however, there were some restrictions, and the constitutional provision for apportioning political offices according to religious affiliation may be viewed as inherently 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.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. There were, however, periodic reports of tension between religious groups, attributable to competition for political power, and citizens continued to struggle with the legacy of a 15-year civil war that was fought largely along sectarian lines. Despite sectarian tensions caused by the competition for political power, churches, mosques, and other places of worship 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 issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country, founded as a modern state in 1943, 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 Informational International, a Beirut-based research firm, showed 28 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, 28 percent Shi'a Muslim, 22 percent Maronite Christian, 8 percent Greek Orthodox, 6 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 Christian Maronites. 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 are Shi'a and Sunni. The smallest Muslim communities are the Alawites and the Ismaili ("Sevener") Shi'a order. The Maronite community, by far 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, Syrian Orthodox (Jacobites), Syrian 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 between various groups date back many centuries, and while relationships between religious adherents of different confessions were generally amicable, group identity was highly significant in most aspects of cultural interaction.

Foreign missionaries present in the country operated missions, schools, hospitals, and places of worship.

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. Precise figures were unavailable due to the lack of census data and the tendency of these groups to assimilate into the culture.

Section II. Status of 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 religions and denominations and guarantee 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.

The Government permits recognized religious groups to exercise authority over matters pertaining to personal status, 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.

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 dominant position being gained by any one confessional group. 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 functions at both the national and local levels of government.

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement, which ended the country's 15-year civil war, reaffirmed this arrangement but, significantly, mandated increased Muslim representation in Parliament so that it would be equal to that of the Christian community and reduced the power of the Christian Maronite presidency. In addition, the Ta'if Agreement, which concluded the country's 15-year civil war, endorsed the constitutional provision of appointing most senior government officials according to religious affiliation. This practice is operative in all three branches of government. The Ta'if Agreement also stipulated 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 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. They 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, as these are also allocated on a confessional basis. However, a number of members of unregistered religious groups are recorded under the recognized religions. For example, most Baha'is are registered under the Shi'a sect. As such, a member of the Baha'i community can 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.

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

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

The 1989 Ta'if Agreement called for the eventual elimination of political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence;" however, little progress has been made in this regard.

Unrecognized groups, such as Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and some evangelical denominations, 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. 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 have 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 male 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 respective sect's leadership councils make appointments to senior clerical posts. For example, 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; however, religious affiliation is encoded on national identity cards and noted on ikhraaj qaid documents. The ikhraj 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.

In most cases religious groups administer their own family and personal status laws. 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.

Article 473 of the Penal Code stipulates a maximum prison term of 1 year for anyone convicted of "blaspheming God publicly." There were no prosecutions reported under this law during the reporting period.

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

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

Anti-Semitism

The July-August 2006 conflict during which Israeli attacks in Lebanon caused considerable civilian deaths and destruction of infrastructure, as well as Israel's former occupation of the southern part of the country, resulted in a strong antipathy for Israelis. The country's media sometimes referred to Israel as "the Jewish State" to avoid referring explicitly to Israel. During the reporting period, the Shi'a terrorist organization Hizballah through its media outlets regularly directed strong rhetoric against Israel and its Jewish population and characterized many events in the region as part of a "Zionist conspiracy." Moreover, anti-Israeli literature was published and distributed with the cooperation of Hizballah, who also controlled and operated Al-Manar TV. On October 20, 2006, Al-Manar broadcast an interview with the head of the Lebanese Islamic Action Front in which he stated that the resistance and Lebanon were victorious and that defeat was "the lot of Israel and this accursed Israeli people--this accursed nation, the offspring of apes and pigs."

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

Following the July-August 2006 conflict with Israel, tensions between the democratically elected government of Fouad Siniora and the antigovernment opposition led by Hizballah resulted in greater political tension between 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 can be attributed to political differences and the legacy of the civil war.

On February 13, 2007, there was a bomb attack on two buses in the town of Ain Alaq, a Christian area north of Beirut. The attack killed 3 persons and injured 20. Leaders of all religious denominations condemned the bombing. It was presumed that the act of violence was intended to provoke sectarian tensions.

On February 5, 2006, in the aftermath of the publication of controversial cartoons in Europe, a crowd of several thousand predominantly Sunni protestors staged a demonstration outside the Danish consulate, situated in the mainly Christian neighborhood of Achrafieh in downtown Beirut. The demonstration turned violent when protestors attempted to burn down the building housing the consulate and also attacked the St. Maroun (Maronite) and St. Nicholas (Greek Orthodox) churches, causing slight material damage. Authorities arrested 441 persons, mostly for damage to the diplomatic facility. These cases were still pending at the end of the reporting period.

A permanent search warrant remained in effect for the 2002 killing of an American citizen missionary affiliated with the Christian and Missionary Evangelical Alliance in Sidon, although the case was officially closed in April 2004. Investigations at the time of the killing suggested that Sunni extremists, possibly operating from the nearby Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp, were responsible.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government actively promotes religious freedom issues 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 Embassy complained to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Information about the airing of anti-Semitic programs by Al-Manar TV. 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.

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