



Libya

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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

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There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. Persons rarely were harassed because of their religious practices unless such practices were perceived as having a political dimension or motivation. Followers of religions other than Islam generally were free to practice according to their beliefs. There is no civil law prohibiting conversion from Islam to another religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

In February 2004 the U.S. government established an official diplomatic presence in the country and immediately began discussing religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. On May 31, 2006, the U.S. government upgraded the existing U.S. Liaison Office in Tripoli to an embassy.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 703,816 square miles and a population of 5,765,563, of which approximately 97 percent was Sunni Muslim. There was no known Shi'a community. There were small Christian communities, composed almost exclusively of foreigners, predominantly African immigrants. A small Anglican community composed of one resident priest and mostly African and Indian immigrant workers in Tripoli were part of the Egyptian diocese. The Anglican bishop of Libya was resident in Cairo. There were Unitarian churches in Tripoli and Benghazi as well as small Unitarian congregations scattered throughout the country. There were an estimated fifty thousand Roman Catholics who were served by two bishops--one in Tripoli and one in Benghazi; both communities were multinational. Catholic priests and nuns served in all the main coastal cities, and there was one priest in the southern city of Sebha. Most of them worked in hospitals, orphanages, and with the handicapped and elderly. The Catholic bishops, priests, and nuns wore religious dress in public and reported virtually no discrimination. An accredited Nuncio resided in Malta, a bishop in Tripoli, and Coptic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox priests in both Tripoli and Benghazi.

There may have been a very small number of Jews, but their location was unknown. In 1974 the World Jewish Congress reported that there were no more than twenty Jews in the country. The Jewish community, which numbered approximately thirty-five thousand in 1948, left for Israel and other countries at various stages between 1948 and 1967. The Government has been rehabilitating the "medina" (old city) in Tripoli and has renovated the Jewish community center that currently serves as a city archive; however, the synagogue has not reopened.

In his August 31, 2004, Revolution Day speech, Libyan leader Colonel Mu'ammar Al-Qadhafi called for compensation for Jews who had been expelled. Discussions regarding possible compensation for confiscated communal properties have been underway since October 2004.

There was no information on the number of foreign missionaries in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The country does not have a constitution, and there is no explicit legal provision for religious freedom. However, a basis for some degree of religious freedom is provided in the Great Green Charter on Human Rights of the Jamahiriya Era, dated December 6, 1988, which states: "The members of Jamahiriya Society...proclaim that religion is absolute faith in the Divinity, and that it is a sacred spiritual value. Religion is personal to each one and common to all. It is a direct relationship with the Creator, without any intermediary. Jamahiriya Society proscribes the monopoly of religion as well as its exploitation for purposes of subversion, fanaticism, sectarianism, partisan spirit and fratricidal wars." The Government opposes militant forms of Islam, which it views as a threat. The Government is tolerant of other religious groups but prohibits the proselytism of Muslims.

The Government regulates the number of places of worship allowed for each Christian denomination present in each city. The Government continued to ban the once powerful Sanusiyya Islamic order; in its place, the country's leader, Colonel Mu'ammr Al-Qadhafi, established the World Islamic Call Society (WICS), which is the Islamic arm of the Government's foreign policy and is active worldwide. The WICS is also responsible for relations with other religious communities, including Christians. The churches reported good cooperation with the WICS. The WICS's main purpose is to promote a moderate form of Islam that reflects the Government's religious views and to ban Islamic groups whose beliefs and practices are at variance with it. Although most Islamic institutions are under government control, prominent families endow some mosques. However, these mosques generally adhere to the government-approved interpretation of Islam.

Although generally tolerant of other religious groups, the Government also exhibited intolerance. On April 10, 2006 Al-Jazeera television aired a speech by Al-Qadhafi on the occasion of the celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad in which he stated that all people are required to be Muslims, the Bible that exists today is a forgery that incites hatred, female Christian followers of Jesus are naked, and Europe and the United States should either convert to Islam or conduct war against Muslims. While not an official statement of the Government, Al-Qadhafi's position as the country's leader does raise concerns about governmental attitudes.

The Government recognizes the Islamic holy days of Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government controls most mosques and Islamic institutions, and even mosques endowed by prominent families generally must conform to the government-approved interpretation of Islam. According to reports, individuals rarely were harassed because of their religious practices, unless such practices were perceived as having a political dimension or motivation. It is prohibited to proselytize Muslims.

Members of minority religious groups were allowed to conduct services, and Christian churches operated openly. The Government routinely granted visas and residence papers to religious staff from other nations. The Government restored the former Catholic church in the medina, which, during the reporting period, was used as an art exhibition hall. The Government had not honored a promise made in 1970 to provide the Anglican Church with appropriate alternative facilities when it took the property used by the Church. The Anglicans shared a villa with other Protestant denominations until 1998, when the Government gave them a small suite of offices to use for worship. Similarly, the Government has not returned Unitarian Church property confiscated in 1971 despite requests from the Church.

The Government allowed priests to visit six Bulgarian medics imprisoned since 1999 for allegedly infecting children with HIV. The medics, convicted and sentenced to death in May 2004, appealed and their sentences were remanded to a lower court on December 25, 2006. The medics' trial remained ongoing at the end of the reporting period. They were allowed to worship with the Greek Orthodox priest in Tripoli.

There were no known places of worship for other non-Muslim religions such as Hinduism, the Baha'i Faith, and Buddhism, although adherents are allowed to practice within the privacy of their homes. Foreign adherents of these religions are allowed to display and sell religious items at bazaars and other gatherings.

Religious instruction in Islam is required in public schools, but in-depth instruction in other religions is not taught. The Government does not issue information on the religious affiliation of children in public schools, and there were no reports of children transferring to private schools for alternative religious instruction.

The Government monitors and restricts all political activity. It also restricts religious literature, including Islamic literature, published in or allowed into the country.

The country adheres to traditional Islamic law which states that a non-Muslim woman who marries a Muslim man is not required to convert to Islam, although many do so; however, a non-Muslim man must convert to marry a Muslim woman.

Citizens who wish to make the Hajj must be at least forty-years old.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On March 2, 2006 the country released eighty-five members of the Muslim Brotherhood, also known as the Libyan Islamic Group, many of whom had been held since June 1998. In September 2005 the Supreme Court overturned sentences imposed on them by the now-abolished People's Court. An ad hoc lower court retried the cases and upheld the original sentences, prior to the government pardon.

Some practicing Muslims have shaved their beards to avoid harassment from members of the security services, who tend to associate wearing beards with advocacy of militant Islam aimed at overthrowing the Government. In the late 1980s the Government began to pursue a domestic policy directed against Islamic extremists; the events of September 11, 2001, reinforced Qadhafi's view that Islamic militancy is a potential rallying point for opponents of the Government. The security service did not harass those who frequently attend mosque services.

There continued to be reports of armed clashes between security forces and Islamic groups that oppose the Government and advocate the establishment of an Islamic government that would enforce a more conservative form of Islam. There were no reports available on the number or status of individuals detained because of their religious beliefs.

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

Information on the relationship among religious groups in society is limited; however, some members of non-Muslim minority religious groups reported that they do not face harassment by authorities or the Muslim majority on the basis of religion.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In February 2004 the United States established an official presence in the country and immediately began discussing religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Additionally, the embassy established an outreach program to maintain close communication with the leaders of the various religious denominations in the country. On May 31, 2006 the U.S. government upgraded its diplomatic representation in the country from a liaison office to an embassy. On June 30, 2006 Secretary Rice rescinded the country's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)