



## Senegal

### 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 were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

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 76,000 square miles and a population of 11.9 million. According to current demographic data, Islam is the predominant religion, practiced by approximately 94 percent of the population. Most citizens practice a syncretic form of Islam, combining formal religious practices with traditional cultural beliefs and values. There also is an active Christian community (4 percent of the population) that includes Roman Catholics, Protestant denominations, and syncretic Christian-animist groups. The remaining 2 percent of the population practice exclusively traditional indigenous religious beliefs or no religion.

The country is ethnically and religiously diverse. Although there is significant integration of all groups, Christians are concentrated in the western and southern regions, while groups that practice traditional religious beliefs are mainly in the eastern and southern regions. Immigrants practice the same religious beliefs as native-born citizens.

A wide variety of 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 specifically defines the country as a secular state and provides for the free practice of religious beliefs, provided that public order is maintained.

After complaints about the lack of Christians in the cabinet that took office in June 2007, President Wade appointed a second Catholic, expanding the cabinet to 38 members.

The Government provides direct financial and material assistance to religious organizations, primarily to maintain or rehabilitate places of worship or underwrite special events. All religious groups have access to these funds, and there is often competition among religious groups to gain them.

The Government observes a number of Islamic and Christian holy days, including Tabaski, Tamkharit, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Korite for Muslims, and Easter Monday, Ascension, Pentecost, Feast of the Assumption, All

Saints' Day, and Christmas for Christians.

Religious organizations are independent of the Government and administer their affairs without government interference. Civil and commercial code requires any group, religious or otherwise, to register with the Minister of the Interior to acquire legal status as an association. Registration enables an association to conduct business, own property, establish a bank account, and receive financial contributions from private sources. Registered religious groups, including all registered nonprofit organizations, are exempt from many forms of taxation. Registration generally is granted, and the Minister of Interior must have a legal basis for refusing registration.

Missionaries, like other long-term visitors, must obtain residence visas from the Ministry of Interior. Missionary groups often established a presence as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Religious NGOs obtain permission to operate from the Ministry of Women, Family, and Social Development. There were no reports that the Government refused visas or permission to operate to any group. Religious NGOs are very active in providing social services and administering economic development assistance programs.

The Government allows for 4 hours of religious education per week in state-owned elementary schools. The religion taught is based on demand from parents, whether Christian or Muslim. An estimated 365,000 students participated in this program across the country.

Privately owned schools are free to provide religious education. The Ministry of Education provides funds to schools operated by religious institutions that meet national education standards. Christian schools, which have a long and successful experience in education, received the largest share of this government funding. The majority of students attending Christian schools are Muslims. Religious charities also received government support.

The Government also operates Islamic schools, which are growing in popularity and include an estimated 20,000 students. In these schools, students learn French and Arabic. These programs are designed to attract children from rudimentary schools that require students to memorize the Qur'an but otherwise do not offer marketable skills.

The Government encourages and assists Muslim participation in the Hajj every year. It also provides similar assistance for an annual Catholic pilgrimage to the Vatican. During the period covered by this report, the Government provided hundreds of free plane tickets to Muslim and Christian citizens to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca or to Rome and the Holy Land.

While there is no specific government-sponsored institution to promote interfaith dialogue, the Government generally seeks to promote religious harmony by maintaining relations with the larger religious groups. Senior government officials regularly consulted with religious leaders, and the Government generally was represented at all major religious festivals or events. In May 2006 the Government hosted the U.N. High Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations during which President Wade called for the group to endorse the Islamic-Christian Dialogue scheduled for March 2008 in order to combat prejudice and misunderstanding.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Majority and minority religious leaders conducted their activities and spoke out on social and political issues, such as political violence and HIV/AIDS, without fear of government sanction. Religious groups, including both Muslims and Christians, had wide access to public media to promote religious activities, such as preaching and religious education. The Government monitored foreign missionary groups and religious NGOs to ensure that their activities coincide with their stated objectives.

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 were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

Religion plays an important role in the lives of most citizens, and society generally was very open to and tolerant of different religious groups. The country has a long tradition of friendly coexistence between the Muslim majority and

Christian, traditional indigenous, and other religious minorities. Interfaith marriage was relatively common. Within certain families, other religious beliefs, such as Christianity or a traditional indigenous religion, were practiced alongside Islam. There were a number of interfaith events throughout the year that celebrate the important role of religion in everyday life.

While the organized Islamic communities (called brotherhoods) were not generally involved directly in politics or government affairs, these groups exerted considerable influence in society and maintained dialogue with political leaders. In the early 2007 election campaign, one prominent leader closely associated with the Mouride Brotherhood, Cheikh Bethio Thioune, campaigned for President Wade. Also in January 2007 the spokesman of the Tidjane Brotherhood, Serigne Abdoul Aziz Sy al Ibn, arranged reconciliation meetings between President Wade and his former prime minister, Idrissa Seck. Close association with a brotherhood, as with any influential community leader, religious or secular, afforded certain political and economic protections and advantages that were not conferred by law.

As in prior years, Christian and Muslim leaders continued to maintain a public dialogue. In December 2006 Archbishop of Dakar Theodore Adrien Sarr and Serigne Abdoul Aziz Sy al Ibn presided over a forum organized by Rencontre Africaine pour la Defense des Droits de l'Homme (RADDHO), one of the leading human rights groups in the country. The forum, called "Pacte Republicain," sought to promote social dialogue and prevent political violence. In early February 2007 Archbishop Sarr and other members of the Catholic hierarchy successfully persuaded the opposition to avoid a violent confrontation with the Government on the eve of the presidential election campaign. In March 2007 the Archbishop met with Thierno Habibou Tall, another Muslim religious leader. The two reiterated their commitment to the promotion of interfaith dialogue.

During the period covered by this report, Protestant groups became more active throughout the country, a sign, according to one prominent local NGO, of the religious tolerance practiced in the country.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights and maintains relations with all major religious groups, including the Mouride, Tidiane, Layanne, and Qadriyya Islamic brotherhoods and Christian groups. The Embassy maintained contacts with several faith-based NGOs, foreign missionary groups, and human rights organizations and activists to monitor issues of religious freedom. The U.S. Ambassador or her representative regularly attended major annual religious festivals or gatherings to promote an open dialogue with various religious groups.

The Embassy has an active program of presenting information about religious diversity and tolerance in the United States. The Embassy routinely released information on Islam in the United States, including statements from the President and the Secretary of State celebrating Ramadan and other Islamic holidays, to the local press, posted on its website and published through a monthly magazine.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90117.htm)