



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Senegal

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 76,000 square miles, and its population is estimated at ten million. According to current government demographic data, Islam was the predominant religion, practiced by approximately 94 percent of the country's population. Most citizens practiced a syncretic form of Islam, combining formal religious practices with traditional cultural beliefs and values. There also was an active Christian community (4 percent of the population) that included Roman Catholics, Protestant denominations, and syncretic Christian-animist groups. The remainder of the population, an estimated 2 percent, practiced exclusively traditional indigenous religions or no religion.

The country was ethnically and religiously diverse. Although there was significant integration of all groups, there were geographic concentrations of some religious groups. The Christian minority was concentrated in the western and southern regions, while groups that practiced traditional religions were mainly in the eastern and southern regions. Immigrants practiced the same faiths as native-born citizens.

A wide variety of foreign missionary groups operated in the country, including Catholics, Protestants, independent missionaries, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

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.

The importance of religion in the country often resulted in the Government giving direct financial and material assistance to religious organizations. There is no official system of distribution for these grants, which are often provided to assist religious groups to maintain or rehabilitate their places of worship or undertake special events. All religions have access to these funds, although there is often competition among religious groups to gain them. During the period covered by this report, the Government provided funds and technical assistance to rehabilitate churches throughout the country, including Dakar's national cathedral, for which the Government donated \$1.2 million (CFA 600 million) in 2005. The Government provided security personnel and enhanced public services to support national religious pilgrimages, both Christian and Muslim.

The Government observes a number of Muslim and Christian holy days. Islamic holy days observed are Tabaski, Tamkharit, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Korite. Christian holy days observed are Easter Monday, Ascension, Pentecost, Feast of the Assumption, All Saints' Day, and Christmas.

Religious organizations are independent of the Government and administer their affairs without government interference; however, the 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 enabled 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. Christian and Islamic groups often established a presence as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Religious NGOs obtained 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.

In 2002 the Government passed a law that allows public schools to offer two hours of religious education, both Islamic and Christian, per school week through a pilot program. Religious teaching is an optional part of the curriculum, and students are not required to participate. This program continues to prosper. In less than three years, sixty-six schools and 10,500 students, who follow studies in French, Arabic and Islamic religious studies, have joined the program, which is designed to attract children to public rather than Qur'anic schools that often teach only the Qur'an and Arabic. 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, receive the largest share of this government funding. The majority of students attending Christian schools are Muslims. Religious charities also received government support.

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. After Pope John Paul II's death, the Government sent a delegation to attend his funeral that included senior government officials and leaders in the Christian community.

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 April 2005 the Government held a summit to prepare for the Islamic-Christian Dialogue. President Wade, Prime Minister Macky Sall, and other government leaders attended the preparatory meeting, along with delegations from several foreign countries, including the United States. President Wade spoke about the peaceful coexistence of religions in the country, a source of national pride.

The Government actively promoted religious tolerance among its citizens.

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

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

Religion played an important role in the lives of most citizens, and society generally was very open to and tolerant of different religious faiths. The country had a long tradition of amicable and tolerant coexistence between the Muslim majority and Christian, traditional indigenous, and other religious minorities. Interfaith marriage was relatively common. Within certain families, other religious faiths, 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.

Islamic communities generally were organized around one of several brotherhoods, headed by a Khalif, who was a direct descendant of the group's founder. The two largest and most prominent of these brotherhoods were the Tidjanes, based in the city of Tivaouane, and the Mourides, based in the city of Touba. At times there were disputes within the different brotherhoods over questions of succession or general authority; however, relations generally were peaceful and cooperative. In recent years, a National Committee to Coordinate Sightings of the Moon, and hence the designation of Islamic holy days, was formed at the suggestion of the Government and attempted to increase cooperation among the Islamic subgroups.

While the brotherhoods were not involved directly in politics or government affairs, these groups exert considerable influence in society and maintain a dialogue with political leaders. Close association with a brotherhood, as with any influential community leader, religious or secular, could afford certain political and economic protections and advantages that were not conferred by law.

Christian and Islamic leaders have long maintained a public dialogue with one another. During the period covered by this report, Protestant groups became more active throughout Senegal, a sign, according to one prominent local NGO, of the religious tolerance practiced in the country.

When anonymous death threats were made against members of the Catholic clergy in early 2004, the Government quickly denounced the threats and assured the protection of Christian leaders. Although an investigation did not identify the perpetrators, there were no further threats against the clergy.

Unlike in the past, there were no cases of interfaith violence during the period covered by this report.

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. During the period covered by this report, the U.S. ambassador and other embassy staff met with religious leaders or their representatives to discuss social and political issues and demonstrate American interest in forging positive relationships with Muslim communities. Embassy staff spent Ramadan engaged in outreach to the major Islamic brotherhoods. The embassy also invited religious leaders to attend its July Fourth celebration and other events. 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 ambassador or his 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 has translated, published, and distributed the "Muslim Life in America" brochure in the two major national languages (Wolof and Pulaar). The embassy routinely released to the local press, posted on its website and published through a monthly magazine, information on Islam in the United States, including statements from the president and the secretary of state celebrating Ramadan and other Islamic holidays. The embassy trained Islamic English teachers and donated Arabic language books to Islamic institutes, schools, and libraries, as well as English-language books on language learning and American Studies.

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