

# THE GAMBIA

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

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

The U.S. embassy regularly engaged with government officials and religious leaders and encouraged continued respect for religious freedom and tolerance. U.S. embassy officers maintained regular contact with leaders of religious groups, and participated in outreach activities. Among issues discussed were interfaith harmony, U.S. religious diversity, and the importance of religion in all aspects of society.

## Section I. Religious Demography

Sunni Muslims constitute more than 90 percent of the population. The great majority is Malikite Sufi; the main orders represented are Tijaniyah, Qadiriyyah, and Muridiyyah. Sufi orders pray together at common mosques. There also are a small number of non-Sufi Muslims, including members of the Ahmadiyya order and some immigrants from South Asia.

An estimated 9 percent of the population is Christian, and less than 1 percent practices indigenous animist religious beliefs. The Christian community, situated mostly in the west and south, is predominantly Roman Catholic; there are also Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of various evangelical denominations. There is a small group of Baha'is and a small community of Hindus among South Asian immigrants and business persons.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The constitution establishes Qadi (Muslim judges trained in the Islamic legal tradition) courts in such places as the chief justice determines. The Qadi courts sit in each of the country's seven regions and apply traditional Islamic law. Their jurisdiction applies only to marriage, divorce, and inheritance questions for Muslims. In 2007 the government established a five-member Qadi appeals panel to deal with appeals against decisions of the Qadi courts and district tribunals that relate to Islamic law.

The Supreme Islamic Council is an independent body that advises the government on religious issues. Although the government does not have representation on the council, it provided the council with substantial funding. The minister of religious affairs maintains a formal relationship with the council.

The government does not require religious groups to register. Faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must meet the same registration and licensing requirements as other NGOs.

The government permits religious instruction in schools. Both public and private schools throughout the country provide Biblical and Qur'anic studies without government restriction or interference. The government funds religious instruction in public schools, but this instruction is not mandatory.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Maulid al-Nabi (the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad), Good Friday, Easter Monday, Assumption Day, Koriteh (Eid al-Fitr), Tobaski (Eid al-Adha), Yaumul Ashura (the Islamic New Year), and Christmas.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Government meetings and events typically commenced with two prayers, one Islamic and one Christian. The government often invited senior officials of both religious groups to open major government events with prayers. The president, a Muslim, delivers a Christmas message to the nation each year and also delivers messages for major Muslim feasts.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

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

The Interfaith Group for Dialogue and Peace, comprised of representatives of the Muslim, Christian, and Baha'i communities, continued to meet regularly to discuss matters of mutual concern such as religious freedom and the need to live together in harmony. Other religious groups such as Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Church of Christ the Redeemer were not part of the interfaith group.

Intermarriage between Muslims and Christians is very common.

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

The U.S. embassy regularly engaged with government officials and religious leaders and encouraged continued respect for religious freedom and tolerance. U.S. embassy officers maintained contact with leaders of different religious groups and encouraged continued cooperation and communication among them. Among topics discussed were interfaith harmony, U.S. religious diversity, and the importance of religion in all aspects of society.

Religious leaders were included in various embassy social functions, such as an iftar (evening meal during Ramadan) hosted by the ambassador. The ambassador attended religious events of all principal religious groups, such as the recent ordination of the new Methodist bishop. In meeting with religious leaders, embassy officers promoted religious tolerance and acceptance.