

SENEGAL 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government and regularly engaged with religious groups. The embassy promoted religious pluralism and dialogue among religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The World Bank estimates the 2011 population to be 12.77 million. Approximately 94 percent of the population is Muslim. Most Muslims belong to one of several Sufi brotherhoods, each of which incorporates unique practices that reflect Islam's thousand-year history in the country. Some Muslims affiliate with Sunni or Shia reform movements. Approximately 4 percent of the population is Christian. Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Protestants, and groups combining Christian and indigenous beliefs. The remaining 2 percent exclusively adheres to indigenous religions or profess no religion.

The country is ethnically and religiously diverse. Although there is significant integration of all groups, Muslims are generally concentrated in the north while Christians largely reside in the west and south. Members of indigenous religious groups mainly live in the east and south.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. 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.

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Muslims may choose either the civil Family Code or Islamic law to adjudicate family conflicts, such as marriage and inheritance disputes. Civil court judges preside over civil and customary law cases, but religious leaders informally settle many disputes among Muslims, particularly in rural areas.

By law, all groups, religious or otherwise, must register with the interior ministry to acquire legal status as an association. Registration enables a group to conduct business, own property, establish a bank account, and receive financial contributions from private sources. Registered religious groups and nonprofit organizations are exempt from many forms of taxation.

Religious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must obtain authorization to operate from the Ministry of Women, Family, and Social Development. The government monitors foreign religious NGOs to determine whether their activities adhere to their stated objectives.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Tabaski (Abraham's sacrifice), Tamkharit (Muslim New Year), the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Korite (end of Ramadan), Easter Monday, Ascension, Pentecost, Feast of the Assumption, All Saints' Day, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The government generally approved applications for registration and religious groups administered their affairs without government interference.

The government provided direct financial and material assistance to religious groups, primarily to maintain or rehabilitate places of worship or to underwrite special events. All religious groups had access to these funds, and often competed to obtain them.

The government encouraged and assisted Muslim participation in the annual Hajj, providing imams with hundreds of free airplane tickets for the pilgrimage for distribution among citizens. The government provided similar assistance for an annual Roman Catholic pilgrimage to the Vatican and Israel.

The government allowed up to four hours of voluntary religious education per week in public elementary schools. Parents could choose either a Christian or

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Muslim curriculum. An estimated 700,000 students participated in religious education through the public elementary school system during the year.

Private schools also provided religious education. The education ministry provided partial funding to schools operated by religious groups that met national education standards. Established Christian schools with strong academic reputations received the largest share of this government funding. The majority of students attending Christian schools were Muslim. In addition to the national curriculum, Christian schools offered religious education to Christian students and moral education to non-Christians. Non-Christian students were not required to take Christian religious courses.

The government also funded a growing number of Islamic schools in which approximately 60,000 students are enrolled. All of these schools were bilingual, teaching in French and Arabic. This program removed thousands of children from street begging and exploitation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Vandals desecrated 160 graves in the two largest Christian cemeteries in Dakar, which church officials stated took place over several months. In October the Catholic Archdiocese of Dakar reported vandals tore crucifixes off gravestones and removed statuettes and other fixtures made of bronze. The authorities arrested several individuals, including one Catholic, who reportedly sold the metal to scrap metal dealers.

In December vandals broke into a Catholic church in suburban Dakar and vandalized a statue of the Virgin Mary. Police launched an investigation into the vandalism, which was still open at year's end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador and embassy representatives encouraged the promotion and protection of constitutional rights and freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Through active engagement with religious leaders, religious groups, government, and civil society, the U.S. embassy promoted and helped facilitate freedom of religion and societal respect for religious freedom.

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The ambassador hosted an iftar that brought together major religious leaders, leaders of grassroots religious organizations, and government officials responsible for religious issues for a discussion of the importance of interfaith friendship and religious freedom.

An embassy-sponsored U.S. speaker addressed a variety of Islamic institutions on interfaith dialogue and religious freedom. The speaker gave presentations to religious groups, student groups, and answered questions on religious freedom and interfaith dialogue in the United States on the embassy's Facebook page.

The embassy also promoted religious pluralism and dialogue among religious groups through exchange programs. One program participant, a professor of Arabic at a local university, made a presentation on religious freedom and tolerance at his university, drawing heavily from what he had seen and heard during his time in the United States.