

SENEGAL

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

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

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom 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 12.5 million. 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 syncretistic 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 west and south, while groups who practice traditional religious beliefs live mainly in the east and south.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

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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 Tabaski, Tamkharit, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Korite, Easter Monday, Ascension, Pentecost, Feast of the Assumption, All Saints' Day, and Christmas as national holidays.

Religious organizations are independent of the Government and administer their affairs without government interference. The civil and commercial codes require 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 and 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.

Religious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) obtain permission to operate from the Ministry of Women, Family, and Social Development. The Government monitors foreign religious NGOs to ensure that their activities adhere to their stated objectives.

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 670,000 students participated in these programs.

Private 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.

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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 25,000 students. During the reporting period, new schools were opened in many regions including Diourbel, Louga, Podor, and Sedhiou.

The Government encourages and assists Muslim participation in the annual Hajj. 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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

On March 10, 2008, Cardinal Theodore Adrien Sarr of Dakar expressed concern about a government project to expropriate 3 hectares of Dakar's Saint-Lazarre cemetery to erect office buildings.

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 affiliation, belief, or practice. As in prior years, Christian and Muslim leaders continued to maintain a public dialogue.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights and maintains relations with all major religious organizations, including Islamic brotherhoods and Christian groups. The Embassy maintained contact with faith-based NGOs, foreign missionary groups, and human rights organizations and activists to monitor religious freedom.

Through the Embassy's Speakers Program, USG Program Alumni Association, editorials, digital video conferences, and other public outreach tools and events, the Embassy promoted religious tolerance, religious diversity, and open dialogue between religious groups.