

Libya (67)



Libya

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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The Government restricts freedom of religion. Although the country is a dictatorship, the Government is tolerant of other faiths, with the exception of fundamentalist or militant Islam, which it views as a threat to the regime.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report; persons rarely are harassed because of their religious practices unless such practices are perceived as having a political dimension or motivation.

Information on the relationship among religions in society is limited.

In February, the U.S. Government established an official presence in the country and began discussing religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country's total land area is approximately 675,501 square miles, and its population is approximately 5,241,000. The country is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim (97 percent) and there is no significant Shi'ite presence. There are small Christian communities, composed almost exclusively of foreigners, predominantly African immigrants. A small Anglican community composed of one resident priest and mostly African and Indian immigrant workers in Tripoli is part of the Egyptian Diocese. The Anglican Bishop of Libya is resident in Cairo. There are Union churches in Tripoli and Benghazi as well as small Union congregations scattered throughout the country. There are an estimated 50,000 Roman Catholics who are served by two bishops—one in Tripoli and one in Benghazi; both communities are multi-national. Catholic priests and nuns serve in all the main coastal cities, and there is one priest in the southern city of Sebha. Most of them work in hospitals, orphanages, and with the handicapped and the elderly. They enjoy good relations with the Government. The Catholic bishops, priests, and nuns wear religious dress freely in public and report virtually no discrimination. In 1997, the Vatican established diplomatic relations with the country, stating that the country had taken steps to protect freedom of religion. The Vatican's goal was to address the needs of the estimated 100,000 Christians in the country more adequately. There is an accredited Nuncio resident in Malta and a bishop resident in Tripoli. There are also Coptic and Greek Orthodox priests in both Tripoli and Benghazi.

There still may be a very small number of Jews. The World Jewish Congress reports that there were no more than 20 Jews in 1974. Most of the Jewish community, which numbered around 35,000 in 1948, left for Israel at various stages between 1948 and 1967. The Government has been rehabilitating the "medina" (old city) in Tripoli and has renovated the large synagogue there; however, the synagogue did not reopen during the period covered by this report.

Adherents of other non-Muslim religions, such as Hindus, Baha'is, and Buddhists, are present.

There is no information on the number of foreign missionaries in the country. As in other Muslim countries, Christian churches are not allowed to proselytize, although generally, this restriction is not observed.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Government restricts freedom of religion. The country's leadership states publicly its preference for Islam, although it is aggressively opposed to more conservative or militant strains of Islam, which it views as a threat to the regime. The Government has banned the once powerful Sanusiyya Islamic order; in its place, the country's leader, Colonel Mu'ammar Al-Qadhafi, established the Islamic Call Society (ICS), which is the Islamic arm of the Government's foreign policy and is active throughout the world. The ICS also is responsible for relations with other religions, including the Christian churches in the country. These churches report good cooperation with the ICS. The ICS's main purpose is to promote a moderate form of Islam that reflects the religious views of the Government and to ban Islamic groups whose beliefs and practices are at variance with the state-approved teaching of Islam. Although most Islamic institutions are under government control, prominent families endow some mosques. However, the mosques generally adhere to the government-approved interpretation of Islam.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government controls most mosques and Islamic institutions, and even mosques endowed by prominent families generally remain within the government-approved interpretation of Islam. According to recent reports, individuals rarely are harassed because of their religious practices unless such practices are perceived as having a political dimension or motivation.

Members of minority religions are allowed to conduct services. Christian churches operate openly and are tolerated by the authorities. The Government routinely grants visas and residence papers to religious staff from other nations. The Government restored the former Catholic church in the medina, and it is currently being used as an exhibition hall. It is not clear if it will be used as a church again. The Government has not yet honored a promise made in 1970 to provide the Anglican Church with appropriate alternative facilities when it took the property used by the Church. The Anglicans shared a villa with other Protestant denominations until 1998 when the Government gave them a small suite of offices to use for worship. Similarly, the Government has not returned Union Church property confiscated in 1971 despite requests from the Church.

The Government allowed Orthodox priests to visit six Bulgarian medics held since 1999 for allegedly infecting children with HIV. The medics, convicted and in May sentenced to death, were permitted to attend services under guard, at least until transferred to a prison in Tripoli in June.

There are no known places of worship for other non-Muslim religions such as Hinduism, the Baha'i Faith, and Buddhism, although adherents are allowed to practice within the privacy of their homes. Foreign adherents of these religions are allowed to display and sell religious items at bazaars and other gatherings.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In 2002, a People's Court in Tripoli sentenced to death Salem Abu Hanak and Abdullah Ahmed Izzedin, 2 out of at least 152 professionals and students who were arbitrarily arrested in 1998 in Benghazi for alleged involvement with Islamic organizations. Eighty-six of the 152 men were sentenced while 66 were acquitted. The convicted received sentences ranging from 10 years to life imprisonment. The appellate hearing began in December 2002, with the next hearing reportedly scheduled to take place in November when a verdict is expected.

Amnesty International reported that the detainees were held incommunicado and their whereabouts remained unknown for more than 2 years following their detention. Additionally, lawyers for the accused were neither allowed to study their case files nor meet with their clients. The lawyers were denied access to the court, and the judge appointed government clerks to replace them. In April 2001, the People's Court in Tripoli appointed legal representation for the men and family members were allowed to meet the accused briefly for the first time since their arrest; however, family members were not able to meet again with the detainees until at least December 2001.

Some practicing Muslims have shaved their beards to avoid harassment from the security services, who tend to associate wearing beards with advocacy of politically motivated Islam. In the late 1980s, the Government began to pursue a domestic policy directed against Islamic fundamentalists; the events of September 11, 2001 have reinforced Qadhafi's view that fundamentalism is a potential rallying point for opponents of the regime.

There continue to be reports of armed clashes between security forces and Islamic groups that oppose the current regime and advocate the establishment of a more traditional form of Islamic government.

There are currently no reports available on the number or status of individuals detained because of their religious beliefs.

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.

A non-Libyan woman who marries a Muslim man is not required to convert to Islam, although many do so; however, a non-Libyan man must convert to marry a Muslim woman.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Information on the relationship among religions in society is limited, although members of non-Muslim minority religions report that they do not face harassment by authorities or the Muslim majority on the basis of their religious practices.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In February, the United States established an official presence in the country and began discussing religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

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