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Guinea

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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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 by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. Religious leaders played critical roles in the national grassroots movement that facilitated constructive political change. The new consensus Government includes a Secretariat General of Religious Affairs, which intends to incorporate both Muslim and Christian religious groups into national decision-making.

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

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 94,926 square miles and a population of 9,947,800. Islam is demographically, socially, and culturally the dominant religion. According to credible estimates, approximately 85 percent of the population adhere to Islam, 10 percent follow various Christian religious groups, and 5 percent hold traditional indigenous beliefs. Muslims generally adhere to the Sunni branch of Islam; there are relatively few adherents of the Shi'a branch, although they are increasing in number. Among the Christian groups, there are Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and other evangelical groups active in the country and recognized by the Government. There is a small Baha'i community. There are small numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, and practitioners of traditional Chinese religious groups among the expatriate community.

Although there are no known organized heterogeneous or syncretistic religious communities, followers of Islam and Christianity have incorporated syncretistic tendencies into the practice of both, reflecting the continuing influence and acceptability of traditional indigenous beliefs and rituals.

Demographically, Muslims are a majority in all four major regions of the country. Christians are most numerous in Conakry, in the southern part of the country, and in the eastern forest region. Christians also reside in all large towns except those in the Fouta Djallon region in the middle of the country, where the deep cultural entrenchment of Islam in Pular (or Fulani or Peuhl) society made it difficult to establish other religious communities. Traditional indigenous religious beliefs are most prevalent in the forest region.

No data was available regarding active participation in formal religious services or rituals, although involvement was high as traditional cultural rituals were often closely tied to religious practices. The Secretariat General of Religious Affairs estimated that more than 70 percent of Muslims practice their faith regularly.

The country's large immigrant and refugee populations generally practice the same religious beliefs as citizens, although those from neighboring Liberia and Sierra Leone have higher percentages of Christians and adherents of traditional indigenous religious groups.

Foreign missionary groups are active in the country.

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.

The Constitution protects the right of individuals to choose, change, and practice the religion of one's choice. To date, protection of religious freedom has not been tested through legal or judicial process.

There is no state religion; however, some believed the Government favors Muslims over non-Muslims. In contrast to previous years, there was no longer a government entity specific to Islamic affairs. In October 2006 the Government changed the Ministry of the National Islamic League to the Secretariat General of the Islamic League. In March 2007 it became the Secretariat General of Religious Affairs to reflect a more inclusive approach by the Government toward all religious groups.

The Government recognizes and the population celebrates both Islamic and Christian holy days. Holy days celebrated as national holidays include Easter, Assumption Day, Christmas, Tabaski, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Ramadan.

The government-controlled official press, which includes the Horoya newspaper and the Guinean Radio and TV network, reports on religious events involving Islamic and Christian groups. The Government prohibits ownership of private radio and television by religious groups or political parties, but religious and political broadcasting is permitted on privately owned, commercial radio. The Government allocated 75 minutes per week for both Islamic and Christian programming on state-owned national television.

All religious groups newly operating in the country must register with the Ministry of the Interior and Security. Only one religious group, suspected to be linked to an extremist network, was denied recognition. Registration entitles religious organizations to value-added tax (VAT) exemptions on incoming shipments and some energy subsidies. Unregistered religious groups continued to operate in the country; however, they are not entitled to VAT exemptions and other benefits available to registered groups. Also, unregistered religious groups are subject to expulsion, a penalty with limited opportunity for legal appeal. In practice, no groups have been expelled.

Muslim organizations also must register with the Secretariat General of Religious Affairs. The Secretariat reported that in the past, it denied only one of the applications, from a U.K.-based group, prohibiting the organization to practice in the country. This was the same group denied recognition by the Ministry of the Interior and Security. During the period covered by this report, all groups that submitted applications were registered.

The small Baha'i community practiced its faith openly and freely, although it was not officially recognized. It was unknown whether the community asked for official recognition.

Like other religious groups seeking government recognition, missionary groups must apply and declare their aims and activities to the Ministry of the Interior and Security. Most new missionary groups join the Association of Churches and Missions in Guinea (AEMEG) and receive assistance in fulfilling the administrative requirements of the recognition process.

Foreign missionary groups and church affiliated relief agencies generally operate freely. The Government requires these groups to pay a visa fee.

The Ministry of Education officially registers and monitors all secular and religious private schools to ensure they follow the national standard; however, there were many unregistered and unmonitored private schools. While there were some government-financed "Franco-Arab" schools, all of which included religious instruction in their curriculum, the vast majority of students attended secular public schools.

There is a general tradition of Islamic schools throughout the country. Islamic schools are particularly strong in the Fouta Djallon region, which was ruled as an Islamic theocracy during the 18th century.

There are a few scattered madrassahs across the country. The schools are usually associated with a mosque, and some are supported with foreign funds. The madrassahs were not formally linked with the public school system; however, some of these schools offered a comparable curriculum for primary education. In general, they were not recognized by the Government. As with other private schools, madrassahs may be closed arbitrarily, since they do not have official recognition.

Missionaries also operate their own schools with no interference from the Government. Catholic and Protestant schools are located primarily in Conakry, but there are some throughout the rest of country as well. Christian missionary schools teach the national curriculum (which is not influenced by religion) and include a special component for Christians.

The Government initiated a project to relaunch the former Inter-Religious Council, composed of members from Anglican, Catholic, and Protestant churches and the Ministry of the National Islamic League. During a series of

general strikes and the February 2007 declaration of a formal "state of siege," government and nongovernment actors called on religious leaders to mediate the crisis. The Government invited all religious groups to participate in its civic education efforts and included different religious groups in its national prayers for peace.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Secretariat General of Religious Affairs represented all religious groups, although its leadership remained predominantly Sunni Muslim. The Secretariat's stated policy was to promote better relations with other religious denominations and dialogue aimed at ameliorating interethnic and interreligious tensions.

In the past the Government spoke out against the proliferation of Shi'a fundamentalist groups on the grounds that they "generate confusion and deviation" within the country's Islamic family. However, there were no reports during the reporting period that the Government restricted the religious activities of Shi'a groups. Shi'a officials were represented in the Secretariat General of Religious Affairs.

By transforming the Ministry of the National Islamic League to the General Secretariat of Religious Affairs during the reporting period, the Government took a more inclusive approach to non-Muslim religious groups. Some non-Muslims claimed that the Government continued to use its influence to favor Muslims over non-Muslims. The Government sometimes provided assistance such as vehicles and lodging for events involving other faith groups, and it approved funding for members of the Association of Churches and Evangelic Missions in Guinea. Non-Muslims served in the cabinet, administrative bureaucracy, and armed forces; however, the Government refrained from appointing non-Muslims to important administrative positions in certain parts of the country, in deference to the strong social dominance of Islam in these regions.

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 belief or practice. However, in some parts of the country, Islam's dominance was such that there was strong social pressure that discouraged conversion from Islam. There were reports that this pressure led some private citizens to limit or retard efforts to acquire land for religious use by other religious groups.

Unlike in the previous report, there was no religiously motivated violence in any part of the country. The legal cases that stemmed from the October 2005 violence between the predominantly Muslim Koniankes and the predominantly Christian Guerzes in N'Zerekore in the Forest Region were all dropped.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy maintained contact with clergy and religious leaders from all major religious communities and monitors developments affecting religious freedom. The mission initiated a partnership with the Secretariat General of Religious Affairs, and representatives from both organizations met regularly to discuss issues and develop programs of mutual concern.

The Embassy sponsored lectures and seminars that provided information on the religious diversity found in American society. The Embassy regularly included members of the Islamic League in public outreach programming because mosques play an important role in disseminating information in local communities. The Embassy sponsored an interdenominational iftar dinner where senior representatives from Islamic and Christian communities discussed religious freedom and fostering mutual understanding. It was the first event of its kind in the country and set the stage for strengthened collaboration among religious communities during the series of strikes and related violence. A particularly intense debate on ways to foster mutual understanding was launched within the forum of an embassy-sponsored book discussion. During the symposium "Women of Action," participants discussed the impact of Islam on their freedoms and made recommendations to support their ability to practice Islam and other religious beliefs according to their personal beliefs.

The Ambassador and other U.S. officials raised religious freedom concerns with senior officials at the Secretariat General of Religious Affairs, the senior imams of Conakry and Labe, and religious leaders outside the capital.

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