

Libya (67)

**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:****Libya**

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LIBYA

The Government restricts freedom of religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Information regarding relations among the country's different religious groups is limited. According to recent reports, persons rarely are harassed because of their religious practices unless such practices are perceived as having a political dimension or motivation.

The U.S. Government has no official presence in the country and maintains no dialog with the Government.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework The Government restricts freedom of religion.

The country's leadership has been known to state publicly its preference for Islam. In an apparent effort to eliminate all alternative power bases, the regime has banned the once powerful Sanusiyya Islamic order. In its place, Libyan 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. The ICS's main purpose is to promote a moderate form of Islam that reflects the religious views of the Government, and there are reports that Islamic groups whose beliefs and practices are at variance with the state-approved teaching of Islam are banned. Although most Islamic institutions are under government control, prominent families endow some mosques; however, they generally remain within the government-approved interpretation of Islam.

Religious Demography

The country is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim (97 to 98 percent). There are small Christian communities, composed almost exclusively of foreigners. There is a small Anglican community, made up mostly of African immigrant workers in Tripoli, which is part of the Egyptian Diocese; the Anglican Bishop of Libya is resident in Cairo. There are Union churches in Tripoli and Benghazi. There are an estimated 40,000 Roman Catholics who are served by two Bishops--1 in Tripoli (serving

the Italian community) and 1 in Benghazi (serving the Maltese community). 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 and with the handicapped; they enjoy good relations with the Government. There are also Coptic and Greek Orthodox priests in both Tripoli and Benghazi.

In March 1997, the Vatican established diplomatic relations with Libya, stating that Libya had taken steps to protect freedom of religion. The Vatican hoped to be able to address more adequately the needs of the estimated 50,000 Christians in the country.

There still may be a very small number of Jews. Most of the Jewish community, which numbered around 35,000 in 1948, left for Italy 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 has not reopened.

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 home. Foreign adherents of these religions are allowed to display and sell religious items at bazaars and other gatherings.

Governmental 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. However, Christians are restricted by the lack of churches; there is a government limit of one church per denomination per city. Members of some minority religions are allowed to conduct services. Christian churches operate openly and are tolerated by the authorities. The authorities reportedly have failed to honor a promise made in 1970 to provide the Anglican Church with alternative facilities when they took the property used by the Church. Since 1988 the Anglicans have shared a villa with other Protestant denominations. 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 was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be

returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

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

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The United States has no official presence in Libya, and consequently maintains no dialog with the Government on religious freedom issues.

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