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2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: The Gambia

OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



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Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the freedom of religious choice as long as it does not impinge on the rights of others or the national interest. The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, establishment of a state religion, and formation of political parties based on religious affiliation.

No new efforts were made on the draft constitution rejected by the National Assembly in 2020. The government allowed for a two-hour reduction in daytime working hours for female civil servants during Ramadan. Officials stated that this practice permitted women to return home with adequate time to prepare meals for their families to break the fast.

The Supreme Islamic Council (SIC), a religious body tasked with providing Islamic religious guidance, continued to state that the minority Ahmadiyya Muslim community does not belong to Islam. The council continued to exclude members of the Ahmadiyya community from its events and activities and to ban the burial of Ahmadis in Muslim cemeteries.

The U.S. Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials regularly met with government officials as well as religious leaders of different faith groups to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador also hosted events to celebrate the strong relationships among different religious groups in the country and to bring together different faith communities. The embassy posted messages on social media to celebrate religious holidays and highlight the importance of religious freedom. In November, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited the country, met with interfaith religious leaders, and delivered the keynote address at the International Conference of Deaf Muslims emphasizing the importance of tolerance among religious groups and the value of inclusion.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.4 million (midyear 2022). Approximately 96.4 percent of the population are Muslim, most of whom are Sunni; the Ahmadiyya Muslim community states it has approximately 50,000 members. Christians make up approximately 3.5 percent of the population, the majority of whom are Roman Catholics. Religious groups that constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Baha'is, Hindus, and Eckankar members. Individuals tend to mix Indigenous (animist) beliefs with Islam and Christianity.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution states, "Every person shall have the freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice," subject to laws that may impose such "reasonable restrictions" as necessary for national security, public order, decency, or morality. The constitution also states that such freedom must "not impinge on the rights and freedoms of others or on the national interest, especially unity." The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, the establishment of a state religion, and religiously based political parties. It provides for the establishment of qadi (Sharia law) courts, with judges trained in the Islamic legal tradition in each of the country's seven regions; their jurisdiction applies only to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance where all the involved parties are Muslims. Citizens may choose to use either the civil or qadi courts.

There are no formal guidelines for the registration of religious groups. Religious groups that do not provide social services are not legally required to register. The criminal code outlaws “insult to religion,” “disturbing religious assemblies,” and “uttering words with the intent to wound religious feelings.” Faith-based groups that provide the same social services as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must meet the same eligibility criteria as other NGOs. By law, all NGOs are required to register with the NGO Affairs Agency and as charities at the attorney general’s chambers. They are required to have governing boards of directors composed of at least seven members responsible for policy and major administrative decisions, including internal control. The law also requires that all NGOs submit to the NGO Affairs Agency a detailed annual work program and budget, a detailed annual report highlighting progress on activities undertaken during the year, work plans for the following year, and financial statements audited by NGO Affairs Agency-approved auditors. The government has stated the submissions help the NGO Affairs Agency monitor NGO activities.

The law does not require public or private schools to include religious instruction in their curricula. The government, through the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE), provides religious education teachers to public schools to teach an academic course on major world religions. Most public schools offer this course, and most students take the class. Some private schools also offer classes in religious education and tolerance and provide an overview of major world religions.

The constitution bans political parties organized on the basis of religion.

The Ministry of Lands, Regional Government and Religious Affairs is responsible for issues related to religious affairs in the country.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

No efforts were made during the year to resurrect the constitutional reform process following the September 2020 rejection by the National Assembly of a draft new constitution. President Adama Barrow, however, pledged to make constitutional reform “the legacy” of his second term in office, which runs until January 2027.

The government has traditionally allowed female civil servants to reduce their daytime working hours by two hours during Ramadan to allow them to return home and prepare

meals for their families to break their fast. There are no formal rules or bills, but the government sends internal memos about the practice.

In November 2022, MoBSE received reports that female Muslim students' veils were being seized at St. Therese's Upper Basic School, a private school in Kanifing. An investigation established that school prefects were unilaterally carrying out this act. MoBSE publicly condemned religious intolerance and said it would punish officials involved in acts that trigger religious tension.

In December, the government hosted an interreligious conference that was attended by religious leaders, government officials, and political actors from 54 African countries, to discuss peace and religious tolerance. The conference was organized by the government in partnership with the World Muslim League.

As in the previous year, President Barrow read televised statements during major Islamic and Christian religious holidays in which he stressed his administration's commitment to promoting religious tolerance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

SIC leaders continued to state that all religious organizations in the country were entitled to freedom of expression and assembly. The SIC continued to state, however, that Ahmadi Muslims did not belong to Islam, and it therefore did not include Ahmadi members in SIC events. Since 2015, the SIC has banned Ahmadis from burying their dead in Muslim cemeteries. Ahmadi Muslims said they believed themselves free to practice their religion without interference but expressed frustration with the SIC's refusal to integrate them into the broader Muslim community. The Ahmadiyya community has deep links to the educational and medical sectors in the country and operates one of the largest affordable sharia-compliant schools in the country. The group proactively seeks new adherents, predominantly by distributing printed material and preaching at health-care facilities.

Intermarriage between Muslims and Christians continued to be common. Due to cultural and gender norms, however, women were generally required to convert to their husband's religion and raise all children in the husband's religion. It was not uncommon for persons of different faiths to live in the same dwelling. Observers stated that religious differences were widely accepted among family members and neighbors, with each jointly celebrating the religious events and holidays of the other.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy representatives held meetings and events with government officials, as well as with religious leaders of different faith groups, including Muslim (both Sunni and Ahmadi) and Christian, to emphasize the importance of continued religious tolerance. The Ambassador hosted Ramadan iftars with a variety of religious, government, human rights, and other civil society and community leaders to bring together persons of different faiths. As was traditional at most public gatherings, both Muslim and Christian prayers were offered at embassy-hosted religious freedom events. Participants at these events commented on the productive and friendly relationship maintained among leaders representing different faiths.

The embassy posted messages on social media, including recorded videos from the Ambassador and other embassy officials, to celebrate major religious holidays and to encourage religious acceptance and tolerance.

During a visit to the country in November, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Affairs met with interfaith religious leaders and delivered the keynote address at the International Conference of Deaf Muslims, where he recognized the group's efforts to include previously overlooked communities in religious activities and the value of inclusion among religious groups and emphasized the importance of tolerance among religious groups.

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