

	2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Senegal
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## 2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Senegal

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor  
July 30, 2012

*[Covers calendar year from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011]*

### Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

Although the country is generally known for its culture of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence among various faiths, there were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights and engaged with the country's religious brotherhoods as a regular part of its work in the country. Through public affairs activities, the embassy promoted religious pluralism and dialogue between religious groups.

### Section I. Religious Demography

Islam is the predominant religion; approximately 94 percent of the population practices Islam. Most citizens belong to one of several Sufi brotherhoods, each of which

incorporates unique practices that reflect Islam's thousand-year history in the country. Some citizens affiliate with Sunni or Shia reform movements, which arose in the last century due to migrations from and travel to the Middle East. There is also an active Christian community, constituting 4 percent of the population, which includes Roman Catholics, Protestant denominations, and groups that practice syncretic Christian and indigenous beliefs. The remaining 2 percent practice exclusively indigenous religious beliefs and values, other minority religions, or no religion.

The country is ethnically and religiously diverse. Although there is significant integration of all groups, Muslims are concentrated in the north, Christians largely in the west and south, and groups who practice indigenous religious beliefs mainly in the east and south.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. 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.

Muslims may choose to have disputes covered by the family code, including marriage and inheritance disputes, adjudicated by civil court judges using Islamic law. Civil court judges preside over civil and customary law cases, but many disputes among Muslims are settled informally by the decision of religious leaders, particularly in rural areas.

The government provides direct financial and material assistance to religious organizations, primarily to maintain or rehabilitate places of worship or to underwrite special events. All religious groups have access to these funds, and there is often competition among religious groups to obtain them.

The government encourages and assists Muslim participation in the annual Hajj, providing hundreds of free airplane tickets for the pilgrimage to imams for distribution among citizens. The government provides similar assistance for an annual Catholic pilgrimage to the Vatican and the Holy Land.

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 Ministry of 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 nonprofit organizations are exempt from many forms of

taxation. The government generally approves applications for registration, and the Ministry of Interior must have a legal basis for denying applications.

Religious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must obtain authorization 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 up to four hours of voluntary religious education per week in public elementary schools. Parents may choose either the Christian or Muslim curriculum. An estimated 700,000 students participated in religious education through the public elementary school system during the year.

Private schools may also provide religious education. The Ministry of Education provides partial funding to schools operated by religious institutions that meet national education standards. Long-established Christian schools with strong academic reputations receive the largest share of this government funding. The majority of students attending Christian schools are Muslim. In addition to the national curriculum, Christian schools offer religious education to Christian students and moral education to non-Christians. Non-Christian students were not required to take Christian religious courses.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Tabaski (Abraham's sacrifice), Tamkharit (Muslim New Year), the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, Korite (end of Ramadan), Easter Monday, Ascension, Pentecost, Feast of the Assumption, All Saints' Day, and Christmas.

### *Government Practices*

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The government provided facilities to ease access and parking at the Saint-Lazarre cemetery in Dakar, resolving concerns expressed in 2008 about its plan to expropriate part of the cemetery to erect office buildings.

In addition to secular public schools, the government also funded Islamic schools, which are growing; in 2011, an estimated 60,000 students attended Islamic schools. By the end of the year, the government opened 200 of the 600 planned Islamic schools. All of these schools are bilingual, teaching in French and Arabic. This program removed thousands of children from street begging and exploitation under the guise of some private Qur'anic schools in the country.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Although the country is generally known for its culture of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence amongst various faiths, there were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Many of these abuses targeted evangelical churches, which are rapidly increasing in membership, mostly due to conversion of members from long-established religious groups. Evangelicals in churches originally transplanted from other African countries or in which many members were refugees also sometimes faced discrimination.

On June 26 rioting youth attacked a Dakar church during demonstrations against the worsening electricity outages in the country. The church was holding worship service at the time of the attack, and nearly 40 people were injured in the incident. On the following day, violent youth attacked seven additional evangelical churches. One church, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Dakar, was burned down. The other six churches suffered less damage. While some of the church attacks may have been an inadvertent result of the churches' proximity to violent protests, the attack on the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God appeared deliberate. Several days after the attacks, the government issued a strongly-worded statement condemning the incidents, and police were posted around the damaged buildings while congregants attempted to clean up.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. government encouraged the promotion and protection of the rights and freedoms enshrined in the country's constitution, including freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Through active engagement with religious leaders, communities of faith, government, and civil society, the U.S. government promoted and facilitated freedom of religion and societal respect for religious freedom within the context of its broader human rights agenda.

Some of the embassy's public affairs activities focused on religious topics. To celebrate Ramadan, the ambassador hosted an iftar (evening meal during Ramadan) that included senior Muslim, Catholic, and evangelical leaders. The embassy brought a U.S. speaker to the country who spoke to a variety of Islamic institutions on gender and Islam. Through the embassy's speakers program, International Visitor Leadership Program, U.S. government program alumni association, and other public outreach tools and events, the embassy promoted religious pluralism and dialogue among religious groups. Embassy officials met with religious leaders to promote tolerance and mutual understanding as well as enlisted their support for development and human rights goals.