

Libya (67)

20/9-99

26

**U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Libya**

Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
Washington, DC, September 9, 1999

LIBYA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Government restricts freedom of religion.

The country is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim (97 to 98 percent). 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 is also responsible for relations with other religions, including the Christian churches in the country. The ICS's main aim is to promote a moderate form of Islam, 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 state control, some mosques are endowed by prominent families; however, they generally remain within the government-approved interpretation of Islam.

According to recent reports, individuals rarely are harassed because of their religious practices. Members of some minority religions are allowed to conduct services. Christian churches operate openly and are tolerated by the authorities. 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. 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 are Union churches in Tripoli and Benghazi. There are an estimated 40,000 Roman Catholics who are served by two Bishops--one in Tripoli (Italian) and one in Benghazi (Maltese). 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. However, Christians are restricted by the lack of churches; there is a government limit of one church per denomination per city.

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 may still 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 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.

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. There was no information available regarding societal attitudes and relations among the country's different religious groups.

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.

[End of Document]