

[\[Print Friendly Version\]](#)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

[Home](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Privacy Notice](#) | [Archive](#) | [Search](#)[About the State Department](#) | [Press & Public Affairs](#) | [Travel & Living Abroad](#)
[Countries & Regions](#) | [International Topics & Issues](#) | [History, Education & Culture](#)
[Business Center](#) | [Other Services](#) | [Employment](#)

Libya

International Religious Freedom Report
Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
October 2001

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. 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.

Information regarding relations among the country's different religious groups is limited.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country's total land area is approximately 679,362 square miles and its population is approximately 5,115,450. 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, that 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 2 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 the country, 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.

Adherents of other non-Muslim religions, such as Hindus, Baha'is, and Buddhists are present.

There is no information on the number of atheists in the country.

There is no information on the number of foreign missionaries in the country, or whether proselytizing is restricted.

Section II: Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Government restricts freedom of religion. The country's leadership states 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. In 1992 the Government announced that the ICS would be disbanded; however, its director still conducts activities, suggesting that the organization remains operational. Although most Islamic institutions are under government control, prominent families

endow some mosques; however, the mosques generally remain within the government-approved interpretation of Islam.

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.

Members of some minority religions are allowed to conduct services. Christian churches operate openly and are tolerated by the authorities; however, Christians are restricted by the lack of churches and there is a government limit of one church per denomination per city. The Government reportedly has failed to honor a promise made in 1970 to provide the Anglican Church with alternative facilities when it took the property used by the Church. Since 1988 the Anglicans have shared a villa with other Protestant denominations.

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

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In June 1998, at least 100 professionals in Benghazi and several other major cities were arrested on suspicion of political opposition activities, specifically support of or sympathy for the Libyan Islamic Group, an underground Islamic movement that is not known to have used or advocated violence. Some practicing Muslims have shaved their beards to avoid harassment from security services. Qadhafi has criticized publicly Libyan "mujaheddin" (generally, conservative Islamic activists who fought with the Afghan resistance movement against Soviet forces) as threats to the regime.

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.

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 Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. 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 IV. U.S. Government Policy

The United States has no official presence in the country and maintains no bilateral dialog with the Government on religious freedom issues.

[End]

Released on October 26, 2001

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)

This site is managed by the Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.