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July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Gambia, The

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
September 13, 2011

[Covers six-month period from 1 July 2010 to 31 December 2010 (USDOS is shifting to a calendar year reporting period)]

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 4,361 square miles and a population of 1.6 million. Sunni Muslims constitute more than 90 percent of the population. The vast majority is Malikite Sufi; the main orders represented are Tijaniyah, Qadiriya, and Muridiyah. Sufi orders pray together at common mosques. Members of the Ahmadiyya order, and a small percentage of other Muslims, predominantly immigrants from South Asia, do not ascribe to any traditional Islamic school of thought.

An estimated 9 percent of the population is Christian, and less than 1 percent practices indigenous animist religious beliefs. The Christian community, situated mostly in the west and south, is predominantly Roman Catholic; there are also Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of various evangelical denominations. There is a small group of Bahais and a small community of Hindus among South Asian immigrants and business persons.

Intermarriage between Muslims and Christians is very common.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The constitution establishes Qadi (Muslim judge trained in the Islamic legal tradition) courts in such places as the chief justice determines. The two Qadi courts sit in Banjul and Kanifing. Their jurisdiction applies only to marriage, divorce, and inheritance questions for Muslims where they apply traditional Islamic law. In 2007 the government established a five-member Qadi appeals panel to deal with appeals against decisions of the Qadi courts and district tribunals that relate to Sharia (Islamic law).

The Supreme Islamic Council (SIC) is an independent body that advises the government on religious issues. Although the government does not have representation on the council, it provided the council with substantial funding. The minister of religious affairs maintains a formal relationship with the council.

Government meetings and events typically commenced with two prayers, one Islamic and one Christian. The government often invited senior officials of both religious groups to open major government events with prayers.

The government does not require religious groups to register. Faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must meet the same registration and licensing requirements as other NGOs.

The government permits religious instruction in schools. Both public and private schools throughout the country provide Biblical and Qur'anic studies without government restriction or interference. The government funded religious instruction in public schools, but this instruction was not mandatory.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Maulid al-Nabi (the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad), Good Friday, Easter Monday, Assumption Day, Koriteh (Eid al-Fitr), Tobaski (Eid al-Adha), Yaomul Ashura (the Islamic New Year), and Christmas. The president, a Muslim, delivers a Christmas message to the nation each year.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees, in the country. However, on September 14, the SIC announced that it had imposed a ban on a radical young imam, Ba Kawsu Fofana, for preaching hatred. The decision was taken at an emergency meeting of the council only days after lodging a complaint about Fofana at a meeting with President Jammeh. However, on October 13, the council lifted the ban, after a meeting between Fofana, the SIC leadership, and President Jammeh.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The Interfaith Group for Dialogue and Peace, comprised of representatives of the Muslim, Christian, and Bahai communities, continued to meet regularly to discuss matters of mutual concern such as religious freedom and the need to live together in harmony. Some groups such as Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Church of Christ the Redeemer were not part of the interfaith group.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In light of the country's strong tradition of religious tolerance, the embassy maintained contact with religious leaders of different faiths and denominations and encouraged continued cooperation and communication among them. Religious leaders were included in various embassy functions, such as two iftars (evening meal during Ramadan), which the charge d'affaires hosted during Ramadan. The embassy also made donations of rice, books, and education materials to some rural communities during Ramadan.
