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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Gambia, The

[Covers the period from July 1, 2008, to June 30, 2009]

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom 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 1.8 million. Sunni Muslims constitute more than 90 percent of the population. The vast majority are Malikite Sufis, of which the main orders represented are Tijaniyah, Qadiriya, and Muridiyah. Sufi orders pray together at common mosques. Members of the Ahmadiyya order are also represented, while a small percentage of 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 Baha'is, and a small community of Hindus among South Asian immigrants.

Intermarriage between Muslims and Christians is very common. In some areas, Islam and Christianity are syncretized with animism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this

right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Constitution establishes qadi 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. The qadi courts apply traditional Islamic law.

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 devout Muslim, celebrates Christmas each year with a State Christmas Dinner.

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

The Supreme Islamic Council is an independent body that advises the Government on religious issues. Although the Government does not have representation on the Council, it provides it with substantial funding. The Minister of Religious Affairs (a role President Jammeh filled during the reporting period) maintains a formal relationship with the Council.

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 funds religious instruction in public schools but this instruction is not mandatory.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

On July 22, 2008, President Jammeh warned Muslims about foreign nationals in and around mosques attempting to recruit persons for violent acts. The President asked the Supreme Islamic Council to "put its house in order" and regulate activities in the mosques. Within a few days, the Supreme Islamic Council denounced extremist violence, which it linked to Shi'ite beliefs, as contrary to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. The Council directed all print and electronic media, Islamic/Arabic schools, cultural institutions, and individuals to cease all programs and activities that propagate what it called "radical" Shi'ite beliefs.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

2008 conference where prominent Muslim religious leaders disparaged Shi'a Muslims.

The Inter-Faith Group for Dialogue and Peace, comprising representatives of the Christian, Muslim, and Baha'i 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 Inter-Faith 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.
