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USDOS – US Department of State

2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: The Gambia

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the freedom of religious choice, as long as doing so does not impinge on the rights of others or the national interest. It prohibits religious discrimination, establishment of a state religion, and formation of political parties based on religious affiliation. President Adama Barrow’s announcement in July of the nonprofit Barrow Youth Movement for Development’s plan to build 60 mosques was criticized by many observers for blurring the lines of separation between state and religion and showing preference of one religion over the others. On December 6, the Office of the President announced the transfer of the religious affairs portfolio to the Ministry of Lands and Regional Affairs from the Office of the President. On several occasions, President Barrow stressed the need for continued religious freedom and tolerance. In a meeting with the Roman Catholic Bishop of Banjul, President Barrow called on religious leaders to continue to “preach peace, good citizenship, and unity.”

Interfaith marriage remained common and accepted, according to religious leaders. There continued to be tensions between the majority Sunni Muslim community and the minority Ahmadiyya Muslim community. The Supreme Islamic Council (SIC), a religious council tasked with providing Islamic religious guidance, continued to state the Ahmadiyya community did not belong to Islam, and it did not include members of the community in its events and activities. The government largely did not become involved in the disagreement between the two communities. The Ahmadiyya International Association of Architects and Engineers met with President Barrow in August to discuss the group’s plans to expand its humanitarian work in the country.

The embassy expanded outreach and decentralized its annual iftar dinner, holding iftars throughout the country in an effort to meet directly with religious leaders from around the country and highlight the message of continued peace and religious harmony.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (July 2018 estimate). Approximately 95.7 percent of the population is Muslim, most of whom are Sunni. The Christian community makes up 4.2 percent of the population, the majority Roman Catholics. Religious groups that constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, Hindus, and Eckankar members. A small number of individuals mixes indigenous beliefs with Islam and Christianity.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution states, “Every person shall have the freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice” subject to laws that may impose such “reasonable restrictions” as necessary for national security, public order, decency, or morality. The constitution also states that such freedom “not impinge on the rights and freedoms of others or on the national interest, especially unity.” The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, the establishment of a state religion, and religiously based political parties. It provides for the establishment of *qadi* courts, with judges trained in the Islamic legal tradition. The courts are located in each of the country’s seven regions, and their jurisdiction applies only to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance where the involved parties are Muslims.

There are no formal guidelines for registration of religious groups, but faith-based groups that provide social services as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must meet the same eligibility criteria as other NGOs. By law, all NGOs are required to register with the NGO Affairs Agency and register as charities at the attorney general’s chambers under the Companies Act. They are required to have governing boards of directors of at least seven members responsible for policy and major administrative decisions, including internal control. The NGO decree requires that all NGOs submit to the NGO Affairs Agency a detailed annual work program and budget, a detailed annual report highlighting progress on activities undertaken during the year, work plans for the following year, and financial statements audited by NGO Affairs Agency-approved auditors. The government has stated the submissions help the NGO Affairs Agency monitor NGO activities.

The law does not require public or private schools throughout the country to include religious instruction in their curricula; however, the majority of schools do so and most students attend these classes. The government provides religious education teachers to schools that cannot recruit such teachers.

The constitution bans political parties organized on a religious basis.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Local media reported a large portion of the Christian community felt alienated when during a stop on President Barrow's Meet the People Tour in July, the president announced plans for the new Barrow Youth Movement for Development to build 60 mosques throughout the country at the request of various communities. The Barrow Youth Movement for Development is a registered nonprofit organization that publicly promotes the president's development agenda and has been publicly endorsed by the president. Many observers criticized this announcement and argued that it blurred the separation of state and religion and showed a preference of one religion over the others. Critics also questioned the source of funding for the construction. Prominent members of the Christian community spoke against the 60-mosque plan, stating that despite initial optimism regarding the Barrow administration's actions to treat religious groups impartially, especially its reversal of the previous administration's declaration of the country as an Islamic state, they stated they felt increasingly alienated by these more recent actions. They also highlighted the fact that only three members of the 19-person cabinet were Christians. Although this constituted overrepresentation in terms of their percentage of the population, observers stated that to some in the Christian community it represented an ongoing decline in influence from the early 1990s.

On December 6, the Office of the President issued a press release announcing the portfolio of Religious Affairs was transferred to the Ministry of Lands and Regional Affairs. No official reason was stated.

President Barrow continued to reiterate his administration's commitment to preserving the country's religious freedom and tolerance. Speaking in Bwiam after being criticized for the 60-mosque announcement, the president said, "We have different kinds of faith groups in this country. We do not discriminate against any one religion because they are all part of my family, the Gambian family. All religions are equal in this country, and I treat everyone equally." In meetings with religious leaders, Special Advisor to the President on Religious Matters Dembo Bojang urged them to be strong advocates of tolerance and to continue to preach peace.

In August President Barrow met with the Ahmadiyya International Association of Architects and Engineers to discuss the group's plans to expand its humanitarian work in the country. The group informed the president that it intended to "build an international center of excellence for vocational and technical training to help build a noticeable skills gap in the areas of architecture, artistry, and technical skills." The president thanked the Ahmadis for their continued investment in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

SIC leaders stated that all religious organizations in the country were entitled to freedom of expression and assembly, although they continued to state that Ahmadi Muslims did not belong to Islam and therefore did not include Ahmadi members in its events. Ahmadi Muslims said they believed themselves free to practice their religion without interference but expressed frustration with the SIC's refusal to integrate them into the rest of the Muslim community. The Ahmadis said they invited the SIC to all of their public events, but SIC members never attended.

Intermarriage between Muslims and Christians continued to be common. It was not uncommon for persons of different faiths to live in the same dwelling, and religious differences were reportedly generally tolerated and accepted among family members and neighbors.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

During Ramadan, the embassy decentralized its annual iftar dinner and hosted four separate iftars for government officials and religious leaders. The dinners were held in the Upper and Lower River Regions of the country, with the Brikama Area Council, and in the Greater Banjul area in an effort to meet directly with religious leaders from around the country and underscore the message of continued peace and religious harmony. The ambassador also held private meetings with the Imam of Kanifing Mosque and the Catholic Bishop of Banjul to stress the need for continued religious tolerance.

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