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USDOS – US Department of State

2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Senegal

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free practice of religious beliefs and self-governance by religious groups without government interference. By law, all faith-based organizations must register with the government to acquire legal status as an association. The government restarted a lapsed campaign to combat forced child begging, which often takes place at some Islamic religious schools. The government also continued its programs to assist religious groups to maintain places of worship, to fund and facilitate participation in the Hajj and Roman Catholic pilgrimages, to permit four hours of voluntary religious education at public and private schools, and to fund schools operated by religious groups. The government continued to monitor religious groups to ensure they operated according to the terms of their registration.

Local and international NGOs continued their efforts to focus attention on the abuse of children, including forced child begging, at some traditional Islamic religious schools (known locally as *daaras*); the organizations continued to urge the government to address the problem through more effective regulation and prosecution of offending teachers.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with senior government officials to discuss conditions faced by students at *daaras* as well as the government's efforts to combat forced child begging. The Ambassador and embassy officers also discussed these issues with religious leaders and civil society representatives in Dakar and across the country. In meetings with civil society and religious leaders, including leaders of the main Islamic brotherhoods, embassy officers continued to emphasize the importance of maintaining religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 15 million (July 2018 estimate). According to government statistics from the 2014 census, 96.1 percent of the population is Muslim. Most Muslims are Sunni and belong to one of several Sufi brotherhoods, each of which incorporates unique practices. There are approximately 5,000 Shia Muslims, according to an unofficial 2011 estimate. Approximately 3.8

percent of the population is Christian. Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Protestants, and groups combining Christian and indigenous beliefs. The remaining 0.1 percent exclusively adheres to indigenous religions or professes no religion.

The Christian minority is located in towns in the west and south. Members of indigenous religious groups live mainly in the east and south.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for the free practice of religious beliefs, provided public order is maintained, as well as self-governance by religious groups free from state interference. The constitution prohibits political parties from identifying with a specific religion. It states religious discrimination is punishable by law.

Muslims may choose either the civil family code or sharia to adjudicate family conflicts, such as marriage and inheritance disputes. Civil court judges preside over civil and customary law cases, but religious leaders informally settle many disputes among Muslims, particularly in rural areas.

By law, all faith-based organizations, including religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) representing religious groups, must register with the Ministry of Interior to acquire legal status as an association. To register, organizations must provide documentation showing they have been in existence for at least two years as an association. Organizations must also provide a mission statement; bylaws; a list of goals, objectives, activities, or projects implemented; and proof of previous and future funding. They must also pass a background check. Registration enables a group to conduct business, own property, establish a bank account, receive financial contributions from private sources, and receive applicable tax exemptions. There is no formal penalty for failure to register other than ineligibility to receive these benefits. Registered religious groups and nonprofit organizations are exempt from many forms of taxation.

The law requires associations, including religious groups and NGOs affiliated with them, to obtain authorization from the Ministry of Women, Family, and Gender in order to operate. This second registration requirement allows the government to monitor organizations operating in the field of social development and identify any interventions these organizations implement. Foreign NGOs must obtain authorization from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

By law, religious education may be offered in public and private schools, and parents have the option to enroll their children in the program. The government permits up to four hours of voluntary religious education per week in public and private elementary schools. The government allows parents to choose either a Christian or an Islamic curriculum. Parents have the opportunity to allow their children to opt out of the curriculum.

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

Government Practices

In March the government restarted a 2016 campaign to implement a 2005 law forbidding forced child begging, an abuse encountered at some Quranic schools or *daaras*. The government worked closely with Muslim religious leaders to gain support for the campaign and for other initiatives, such as a draft law regulating traditional Islamic schools.

The government continued to provide direct financial and material assistance to religious groups, for use primarily in maintaining or rehabilitating places of worship or for underwriting special events. There continued to be no formal procedure for applying for assistance. All religious groups continued to have access to these funds and competed on an ad hoc basis to obtain them. President Macky Sall occasionally visited and supported beneficiaries of these funds. For example, every year members of the Mouride religious brotherhood travel to the seat of the brotherhood in Touba for the annual Magal pilgrimage. Under President Sall, the government constructed a new highway to connect Touba with the city of Thies to the west in order to ease travel for the pilgrimage. Although the highway was not complete in time for the Magal pilgrimage in October, the president opened up the nearly complete highway, free of charge, for all Magal pilgrims. The highway was subsequently completed and inaugurated by President Sall on December 20.

The government continued to assist Muslim participation in the Hajj and again provided imams with hundreds of free airplane tickets for the pilgrimage for distribution among citizens. In addition, the government organized Hajj trips for approximately 2,000 additional individuals. The government also continued to provide assistance for an annual Roman Catholic pilgrimage to the Vatican, the Palestinian territories, and Israel. The Catholic Church reported the government provided 380 million CFA francs (\$668,000) for travel to the Vatican, compared with 370 million CFA francs (\$651,000) in 2017.

The Ministry of Education continued to provide partial funding to schools operated by religious groups that met national education standards. It provided the largest share of this funding to established Christian schools, which in general maintained strong academic reputations. The majority of students attending Christian schools continued to be Muslim. The Ministry of Education reported approximately 50 percent of primary school students again participated in religious education through the public elementary school system during the year. The government also continued to fund a number of Islamic schools, which enrolled approximately 60,000 students.

The Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Women, Family, and Gender continued to monitor domestic associations, including religious groups and NGOs affiliated with them, to ensure they operated according to the terms of their registration. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to do the same with foreign-based NGOs, including those

affiliated with religious groups. Each association submitted an annual report, including a financial report, which the ministries used in their effort to track potential funding of terrorist groups.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Local and international NGOs continued to highlight abuses of students at some *daaras*, where young children sometimes resided. Some *daaras* reportedly continued to force children to beg. Local media and NGOs continued to document cases of physical and sexual abuse of *daara* students by certain *marabouts*, or Quranic schoolteachers. Human Rights Watch reported tens of thousands of children suffered from abuse in 2017. Civil society and children’s rights advocates reprised their appeals to the government to implement more effective regulation of *daaras* and to prosecute Quranic teachers who committed serious violations against children.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to meet with federal and local government officials in Dakar and with local authorities in Saint Louis to discuss conditions faced by *daara* students as well as the government’s efforts to combat forced child begging. The Ambassador and embassy officers also met with civil society representatives and religious leaders in the central regions of Thies, Diourbel, Louga, and Fatick to discuss these issues. As part of their continuing engagement with religious figures, including leadership of the main Islamic brotherhoods, as well as with civil society, embassy officers emphasized the importance of maintaining religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue. In particular, the Ambassador discussed efforts to combat forced child begging and emphasized religious tolerance with the heads of the country’s two largest Islamic brotherhoods, the Mouride Brotherhood (based in the city of Touba) and the Tidiane Brotherhood (based in the city of Tivaouane).

During Ramadan, the embassy hosted a series of iftars in Dakar and Fatick, geared to different audiences, which focused on diversity as well as religious tolerance and inclusion. Attendees at the different events included local government officials, youth leaders, religious leaders, NGO representatives, and other members of civil society.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2018)



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