



Libya

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

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The Government restricts freedom of religion. Although Libya is a dictatorship, the Government is tolerant of other faiths, with the exception of fundamentalist or militant Islam, which it views as a threat to the regime.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report; 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 5,240,599. The country is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim (97 percent); there is no significant Shi'ite presence. There are small Christian communities, composed almost exclusively of foreigners. A small Anglican community comprised of one resident priest and mostly African immigrant workers in Tripoli 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 two Bishops—one in Tripoli and one in Benghazi; both communities are multi-national. 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. The Catholic bishop, priests and nuns wear religious dress freely in public and report virtually no discrimination. There are also Coptic and Greek Orthodox priests in both Tripoli and Benghazi.

In 1997 the Vatican established diplomatic relations with the country, stating that the country had taken steps to protect freedom of religion. Its goal was to address the needs of the estimated 50,000 Christians in the country more adequately. There is an accredited Nuncio resident in Rome and a bishop resident in Tripoli.

There still may be a very small number of Jews. Most of the Jewish community, which numbered around 35,000 in 1948, left for Israel 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 did not reopen during the period covered by this report.

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

There is no information on the number of foreign missionaries in the country. As in other Muslim countries, Christian churches are not allowed to proselytize, although generally, this restriction is not observed.

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, although it is aggressively opposed to more conservative or militant strains of Islam, which it views as a threat to the regime. The Government has banned the once powerful Sanusiyya Islamic order; in its place, Libyan leader Colonel Mu'ammarr 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. Although most Islamic institutions are under government control, prominent families endow some mosques; however, the mosques generally adhere to 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 minority religions are allowed to conduct services. Christian churches operate openly and are tolerated by the authorities; the Government routinely grants visas and residence papers to religious staff from other nations. The former Catholic church in the medina is being restored and may be used as a church again. The Government has not yet honored 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.

Orthodox priests have been allowed to visit six Bulgarian medics held since 1999 for allegedly infecting 400 children with HIV, and the medics themselves have been allowed to attend Orthodox services under guard.

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

On February 16, a People's Court in Tripoli sentenced to death Salem Abu Hanak and Abdullah Ahmed Izzedin, 2 out of at least 152 professionals who were arbitrarily arrested in 1998 in Benghazi for involvement with Islamic organizations. Eighty-six of the 152 men were sentenced while 66 were acquitted. Those who were convicted received sentences ranging from 10 years to life imprisonment. The appellate hearing began on December 14, 2002. Amnesty International (AI) reported that lawyers for the accused were neither allowed to study their case files nor were they allowed to meet with their clients. The lawyers were denied access to the court, and the judge appointed government clerks to replace them. Family members were allowed to meet the accused briefly for the first time since their arrest in April 2001, but were not able to do so again until at least December 2001.

Some practicing Muslims have shaved their beards to avoid harassment from the security services, who tend to associate wearing beards with advocacy of politically motivated Islam. In the late 1980s, Qadhafi began to pursue a domestic policy directed against Islamic fundamentalists; September 11 has reinforced his view that fundamentalism is a potential rallying point for opponents of 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.

There are currently no reports available on the number or status of individuals detained because of their religious beliefs.

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 refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

A non-Libyan woman who marries a Muslim Libyan man is not required to convert to Islam, although many do so; however, a non-Libyan man must convert in order to marry a Muslim Libyan woman.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Information on religious freedom is limited, although members of non-Muslim 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.

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