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2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Senegal

OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free practice of religious beliefs, provided public order is maintained, as well as for self-governance by religious groups without government interference. The constitution also states religious freedom must be respected and religious discrimination is punishable by law. All faith-based organizations are legally required to register with the government to acquire legal status as associations.

The government continued to work with Muslim religious leaders in a campaign to stop abuses against children in some Quranic schools, or *daaras*, while child protection legislation remained pending in the National Assembly. The government continued to assist religious groups to maintain places of worship and to fund some schools operated by religious groups that met national education standards.

The country's religious leaders continued to emphasize the high value they and the population placed on tolerance and peaceful coexistence among faith-based communities. For example, Catholic Church leaders protested to the government after they said an imam denigrated the Catholic faith on television. The imam apologized for his remarks, and the

broadcasting network pledged to avoid airing similar remarks in the future. Local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to focus attention on the abuse of children, including forced child begging, at some daaras. These organizations continued to urge the government to address the problem through more effective regulation and prosecution of offending teachers.

In December, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Office of the Presidency to discuss the country's role as a founding member of the International Religious Freedom and Belief Alliance and regional leader on peaceful religious pluralism. The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers met regularly with senior government officials to discuss conditions faced by students (known locally as *talibé*) at daaras, as well as the government's efforts to combat forced child begging at those schools. The Ambassador and embassy officers also discussed these issues and aspects of religious freedom with religious leaders and civil society representatives in Dakar and across the country. On the margins of the country's annual Colloquium for Interreligious Dialogue, the Ambassador at Large led a discussion with interfaith leaders about the challenges to maintaining peaceful coexistence and respect among different religious, political, and cultural groups in the region. In meetings with civil society and religious leaders, including leaders of the main Islamic brotherhoods, embassy officers emphasized the importance of religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue. Working with the government, NGOs, and other international organizations, the embassy supported programs to reduce child begging at Quranic schools, to provide assistance to its victims, and to raise public awareness about the problem.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.9 million (midyear 2022), with 97.2 percent of the population identifying as Muslim, according to government statistics. Most Muslims are Sunni and belong to one of several Sufi brotherhoods, each of which incorporates unique practices, including some aspects of Indigenous beliefs. Although figures vary, a 2021 study estimates there are one million Shia Muslims in the country, or approximately 6 percent of the population. Approximately 2.7 percent of the population are Christian. Christian groups include Catholics, Protestants, and groups combining Christian and Indigenous beliefs.

Most Christians live in towns in the west 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 freedom must be respected and 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 NGOs representing religious groups, must register with the Ministry of Interior to acquire legal status as associations. To register, organizations must provide documentation showing they have existed for at least two years; 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 taxation on donations received.

The law requires associations, including religious groups and NGOs affiliated with them, to obtain authorization from the Ministry of Women, Family, Gender, and Child Protection to operate. This second registration requirement allows the government to monitor organizations operating in the social development field and to identify any programs these organizations implement to ensure they operate according to the terms of their registration. Foreign NGOs, including those affiliated with religious groups, must also obtain authorization from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To maintain their authorization, each association and domestic and foreign NGOs must submit an annual report, including a financial report, and activity reports every three months which the ministries use to monitor for irregularities and potential threats against national security. In addition, all NGOs must also be part of the government-NGO Strategic Partnership Council, chaired by the Prime Minister.

By law, religious education may be offered in public and private schools. 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 an Islamic or Christian curriculum. There is an opt-out available for parents who do not wish their children to attend.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

The government continued to work closely with Muslim religious leaders in a campaign to stop abuses against children in some daaras through a modernization program, while child protection legislation remained pending in the National Assembly. President Macky Sall summoned more than 1,500 Quranic teachers and religious leaders from all 14 regions on November 28 to announce government actions and resources for daaras. Specifically, the President said the government would: undertake a comprehensive mapping of daaras across the country; include daara students in social safety nets, such as universal health coverage; finalize the legal and regulatory framework for daaras; and develop skills training opportunities for daara graduates. Sall designated November 28 “National Daara Day,” when the President would convene Quranic teachers annually, and established a “Prize of the President of the Republic for the Recital of the Holy Quran.” He also announced he would create a new inspectorate and national daara committee attached to the Office of the Presidency to support daaras and graduates of Arabic education, to be composed of representatives from the regions and the relevant ministries, that would receive a percentage of the national education budget.

Some Quranic teachers refused to attend the President’s meeting; others came with their own list of demands, including a request to be free from what they said was “harassment” and “persecution” by state authorities, and to be moved out from under the supervision of the Ministry of Women, Family, and Child Protection. Judicial officials attempted to increase prosecutions for forced child begging in daaras by reinforcing antitrafficking in persons legal provisions through a published judiciary circular and training. President Sall also said on November 28 that he would not issue pardons for Quranic teachers imprisoned for abuse or exploitation of their students.

The government continued to provide direct financial and material assistance to religious groups for use primarily in maintaining or rehabilitating Islamic and Christian places of worship and related infrastructure, such as a highway to the Mouride Sufi holy city of Touba

and a road linking a new conference center to the Great Mosque in Kaolack, or for underwriting special events, such as the Hajj for Muslims and Catholic pilgrimages to the Holy Land and Rome. 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 Sall occasionally visited and supported beneficiaries of these funds, particularly on the eve of religious Islamic celebrations, such as the Sufi Magal of Touba pilgrimage in September and the Gamou celebration in Tivaouane in October, which commemorates the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Ministry of Education continued to provide partial funding to schools operated by religious groups that met national education standards. Catholic schools generally maintained the strongest academic reputations; the majority of students who attended Catholic schools continued to be Muslim. There were 354 registered Catholic schools, and 1,200 registered Franco-Arab schools; the latter had a dual system of education that used both the French and Quranic school traditions. A total of approximately 762,100 students from all religious backgrounds attended an estimated 4,800 total schools, including unregistered Islamic daaras. Local experts noted that unregistered Islamic schools outnumbered Catholic schools, as many parents informally sent their children to these establishments to learn the Quran.

Legislation that would have institutionalized harsher penalties for homosexuality, including increasing prison terms from up to five to up to 10 years, was introduced in the National Assembly but failed to gain majority support and was rejected on January 5. A network of more than 93 Islamic organizations known as *And Samm Jikko yi* ("values defense league") continued the campaign for tougher penalties against homosexuality, organizing a demonstration February 20 in Dakar's main square. In October, a group of conservative opposition party lawmakers again proposed a law to tighten restrictions against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community. Some religious and political leaders opposed the proposed legislation as a political maneuver. The legislation remained pending at year's end.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The country's religious leaders continued to emphasize the high value they and the population placed on tolerance and peaceful coexistence among faith-based communities. NGOs and press reported that the Muslim and Christian communities had a longstanding history of religious harmony and mutual respect, and it was common to encounter interreligious families. In April, when the religious events of Ramadan and Lent partially

overlapped, communities fasted together and offered each other food and shared meals to break the fasts together.

In March, Catholic media reported that local volunteers from the Catholic community of Sant'Egidio, a global lay association dedicated to social service, helped negotiate between the army, the government of The Gambia, and separatists from the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) to arrange the release of seven Senegalese soldiers captured in a firefight on January 24 and the return of the remains of four others killed in the same clash. The MFDC has waged a low-intensity insurgency in the southern Casamance region for 40 years.

In February, Catholic Church leaders from the National Laity Council sent a letter of protest to the Ministry of the Interior and the president of the National Council of Broadcasting Regulation after, they said, an imam stated in remarks on television that Catholics were “not believers.” Following a public outcry, the imam apologized for his remarks and the broadcasting network issued a press release pledging to avoid airing similar remarks in the future.

Local and international NGOs continued to highlight abuses of talibé at some daaras, where young children residing to learn Quranic teachings were sometimes forced by school leaders to beg on the streets to collect funds for the daaras. The problem of forced begging in daaras remained widespread, according to several NGOs.

Local media and NGOs continued to report cases of physical and sexual abuse of daara students by some *marabouts* (Quranic teachers). In some communities, religious, NGO, and local government leaders, in keeping with the President's announced daara modernization program, sought to combat the problem through economic and educational programs that would prevent children from begging in the first place. Local women's groups also assisted in the care of children within daaras to prevent child begging.

According to media and NGOs, LGBTQI+ persons faced widespread social intolerance and acts of violence, often justified by religious beliefs. LGBTQI+ persons were subject to threats, mob attacks, robberies, expulsion from their families or communities, blackmail, and rape, sometimes condoned or tolerated by authorities and political figures, according to NGOs. Observers reported an increase in threats of physical violence against people perceived to be LGBTQI+ or community allies ahead of the July 31 legislative elections, forcing members of that community to flee or hide for their safety. In January, press and human rights defenders

reported that Muslim clerics occasionally denied burial to citizens deemed to belong to an “inferior” caste or the LGBTQI+ community.

Senegalese soccer player Idrissa Gueye of the French club Paris Saint-Germain was widely praised in Senegal for refusing to play in a match on World Day against Homophobia on May 17 because the team’s jerseys that day featured rainbow-colored numbers in support of the LGBTQI+ community. Many on social media, including prominent political figures such as President Sall, posted remarks approving of Gueye’s action as a reflection of his Muslim faith.

Also in May, a crowd stripped and beat a man, then paraded him down a busy street in Dakar while yelling anti-LGBTQI+ taunts. A video of the event was widely circulated on social media. According to local media reports, the victim was a visiting foreign citizen who was attacked because of the “flamboyant” way he was dressed. Media said that police arrested three men for the attack. Press reports and social media coverage characterized the event as a warning and emphasized that the LGBTQI+ community would never be accepted by Muslims in the country. In a June press release, the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Senegal called for the respect of the physical integrity of individuals but denounced “any initiative to legalize homosexuality that is not in conformity with traditional values and Christian religious beliefs.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On December 1, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Office of the Presidency to discuss the country’s role as a founding member of the International Religious Freedom and Belief Alliance and its regional leadership on peaceful religious pluralism.

The Ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with senior government officials from the Ministries of Justice; Education; Interior; and Women, Children, and Families; the Office of the Prime Minister; and the Office of the Presidency to discuss conditions faced by students at daaras and the government’s efforts to combat forced child begging at those Quranic schools.

In November, the Ambassador visited the four largest Sufi brotherhoods, representing more than 80 percent of the country’s population, and met with several of the brotherhoods’ sitting Khalifs and spokespersons. During these visits, the Ambassador discussed the country’s successful model for coexistence, religious harmony, and stability, as well as the role of Sufism in the country and its values of religious tolerance, respect, and nonviolence.

During the year, the Ambassador and embassy officers discussed the conditions of students at daaras and the government's initiatives to stop forced child begging with religious leaders and civil society representatives in Dakar and across the country, including during a visit by embassy officers to the Saint Louis region in July.

In November, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith dinner with civil society and religious leaders from the Catholic, Christian Evangelical, Indigenous, and Muslim faiths. Participants discussed religious freedom, cultivating religious harmony and countering violent extremism, and promoting responsible civic participation and human rights.

The Ambassador gave keynote remarks to more than 200 mostly Muslim students at the University of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba on November 15 in Touba, highlighting the country's shared values with the United States and underscoring the critical role education plays in securing a peaceful and prosperous future.

In November, the Ambassador toured the Tivouane Great Mosque of the Tidiane brotherhood, a group that represents approximately 45 percent of the country's population; a library of Tidiane scholarly publications; a traditional daara for elementary school-aged children; and the Institute El Hadj Malick Sy, which offers Franco-Arabic language courses for teenagers. During these visits, the Ambassador discussed the religious community's ability to use education to combat disinformation or extremist voices, advocate dialogue during moments of political tension, and galvanize efforts to stop forced child begging.

In November, the Ambassador also visited the two oldest religious communities (Sufi brotherhoods) in the country, the Khadr (in the Thies Region) and the Layenne (in the Dakar Region), where he stressed U.S. support for peace in the country, advocated civic and religious dialogue, and stressed to religious and community leaders the importance of education.

During his visit, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom hosted discussions with religious actors and civil society leaders and visited worship sites, including the country's largest cathedral and mosque. His visit coincided with the country's 14th annual civil society-led Colloquium for Interreligious Dialogue, which examined how religion and cultural traditions contributed to or detracted from social cohesion, solidarity, stability, and peace. On the margins of the colloquium, the Ambassador at Large led a group of interfaith leaders from the Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and Indigenous communities in a discussion of the country's history of respect for freedom of religion or belief and the challenges to maintaining peaceful coexistence and respect among different religious, political, and cultural groups in the region. The participants agreed that education that encourages pluralism is

critical to the long-term protection and advancement of religious freedom and other human rights.

In May, the embassy launched an NGO-implemented, three-year program to reduce forced child begging in some communities by, among other things, converting privately run daaras into community-based schools. The program included engagement with religious leaders and support for families in rural communities to prevent children being sent to urban centers where they might be forced to beg. The program aimed to provide protection, education, and welfare services to 6,500 victims of forced child begging. Department of State officials from the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, who visited the country in November and December to gauge progress on the government's efforts to combat forced begging of talibé children, also visited the project.

Using funds drawn from a U.S. government COVID-19 relief program, the embassy supported another NGO's work with the Ministry of Women, Family, and Child Protection to set up national reception centers for vulnerable children, including those attending Quranic schools who were victims of forced begging, to provide them education, clothes, hygiene kits, and monthly food allowances.

Through an international organization, the embassy supported a program to provide training and technical cooperation to the government to create standard operating procedures for police, gendarmes, and magistrates with clear guidelines for the identification, investigation, and referral of victims in trafficking-in-persons cases, most of whom are children attending Quranic schools who are forced to beg for those schools. The program's standard operating procedures were approved by the Ministries of Justice, Family and Child Protection, and Health and Social Affairs; the programs were pending implementation at year's end.

The embassy again sponsored a workshop for young filmmakers creating short films to inspire social change. One of the films focused on educating the public about the daily living conditions of the talibé and encouraged policy makers to better protect Quranic students from being forced to beg for alms for their schools.

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