

Libya (67)

40



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Libya**International Religious Freedom Report**

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Government restricts freedom of religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Reports indicate that 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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 679,362 square miles, and its population is approximately 5,240,600. The country is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim (97 percent). There are small Christian communities, composed almost exclusively of foreigners. There is a small Anglican community, made up mostly of African immigrant workers in Tripoli, that 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 2 Bishops—1 in Tripoli (serving the Italian community) and 1 in Benghazi (serving the Maltese community). 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. 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 Government had taken steps to protect freedom of religion. Its goal was to address more adequately the needs of the estimated 50,000 Christians in the country.

There still may be a very small number of Jews. Most of the Jewish community, which numbered around 35,000 in 1948, left for Italy 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 has not reopened.

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

There is no information on the number of atheists in the country.

There is no information on the number of foreign missionaries in the country, or whether proselytizing is restricted.

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. In an apparent effort to eliminate all alternative power bases, the regime has banned the once powerful Sanusiyya Islamic order. In its place, Libyan leader Colonel Mu'ammar Al-Qadhafi established the Islamic Call Society (ICS), which is the outlet for state-approved religion, as well as a tool for exporting the revolution abroad. 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. In 1992 the Government announced that the ICS would be disbanded; however, at least some elements of the organization remain operational. Although most Islamic institutions are under government control, prominent families endow some mosques; however, the mosques generally remain within 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. Reports indicate that individuals rarely are harassed because of their religious practices, unless such practices are perceived as having a political dimension or motivation.

Members of some minority religions are allowed to conduct services. Christian churches operate openly and are tolerated by the authorities; however, Christians are restricted by the lack of churches and there is a government limit of one church per denomination per city. The Government reportedly has failed to honor 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.

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 gatherings.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In 1998 at least 150 professionals in Benghazi and several other major cities were arrested on suspicion of political opposition activities, specifically support of or sympathy for the Libyan Islamic Group, an underground Islamic movement that is not known to have used or advocated violence. The Government did not acknowledge the arrest of these individuals until their trial began in March 2001. Proceedings paused and were continued in September 2001. The accused were denied access to family or choice of legal counsel. The current status of the detainees is unknown.

Some practicing Muslims have shaved their beards to avoid harassment from security services. In the late 1980's, the Government began to pursue a domestic policy directed against Islamic fundamentalists; the Government leadership appears to view fundamentalism as a potential rallying point for opponents of the Government. Qadhafi has criticized publicly Libyan "mujaheddin" (generally, Islamic activists who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan) as threats to 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.

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.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Information on religious freedom is limited, although members of 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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