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Libya

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The law provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right with some restrictions. The State religion is Islam. Although the country is a dictatorship, the Government is tolerant of other faiths, with the exception of 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 reporting period. Persons rarely are harassed because of their religious practices unless such practices are perceived as having a political dimension or motivation. Followers of religions other than Islam generally are free to practice according to their beliefs. There is no written law prohibiting religious conversion from Islam to another religion and there is no legal punishment for doing so.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

In February 2004, the U.S. Government established an official presence in the country and immediately began discussing religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 703,816 square miles, and its population is an estimated 5,765,563, of which approximately 97 percent is Sunni Muslim. There is no reported Shi'a community. There are small Christian communities, composed almost exclusively of foreigners, predominantly African immigrants. A small Anglican community composed of one resident priest and mostly African and Indian immigrant workers in Tripoli is part of the Egyptian Diocese. The Anglican Bishop of Libya is resident in Cairo. There are Unitarian churches in Tripoli and Benghazi as well as small Unitarian congregations scattered throughout the country. There are an estimated 50,000 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, orphanages, and with the handicapped and the elderly. They enjoy good relations with the Government. The Catholic bishops, priests, and nuns wear religious dress freely in public and report virtually no discrimination. In 1997, the Vatican established diplomatic relations with the country, stating that the country had taken steps to protect freedom of religion. The Vatican's goal was to address more adequately the needs of the estimated 100,000 Christians in the country. There is an accredited Nuncio resident in Malta and a bishop resident in Tripoli. There are also Coptic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox priests in both Tripoli and Benghazi.

There still may be a very small number of Jews, but their location is unknown. The World Jewish Congress reported that there were no more than 20 Jews in 1974. 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 renovated the large synagogue there; however, the synagogue has not reopened.

In his August 31, 2004 Revolution Day speech, Colonel Libyan Leader Mu'ammar Al Qadhafi called for compensation for Jews who had been expelled. In October, a group of Italian Jews of Libyan origin traveled to the country at the invitation of the Government to begin preliminary discussions regarding possible compensation for confiscated communal properties.

There was no information available about other non-Muslim groups, such as Hindus, Baha'is, and Buddhists.

There was no information on the number of foreign missionaries in the country. Proselytizing by non-Muslims is prohibited.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Government restricts freedom of religion. The state religion is Islam; however, the Government aggressively opposes militant forms of Islam, which it views as a threat to the regime. The Government regulates the number of places of worship allowed for each Christian denomination present in each city. The Government continues to ban the once powerful Sanusiyya Islamic order; in its place, the country's leader, Colonel Mu'ammar Al-Qadhafi, established the World Islamic Call Society (WICS), which is the Islamic arm of the Government's foreign policy and is active worldwide. The WICS also is responsible for relations with other religious communities, including Christians. These churches report good cooperation with the WICS. The WICS's main purpose is to promote a moderate form of Islam that reflects the Government's religious views and to ban Islamic groups whose beliefs and practices are at variance with the state-approved teaching of Islam. Although most Islamic institutions are under government control, prominent families endow some mosques. However, these mosques generally adhere to the government-approved interpretation of Islam.

The Government recognizes the Islamic holy days of Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and the Birth of the Prophet.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government controls most mosques and Islamic institutions, and even mosques endowed by prominent families generally must conform to 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. The Government routinely grants visas and residence papers to religious staff from other nations. The Government restored the former Catholic Church in the medina, which, during the reporting period, was used as an art exhibition hall. The Government has not honored a promise made in 1970 to provide the Anglican Church with appropriate alternative facilities when it took the property used by the Church. The Anglicans shared a villa with other Protestant denominations until 1998 when the Government gave them a small suite of offices to use for worship. Similarly, the Government has not returned Unitarian Church property confiscated in 1971 despite requests from the Church.

The Government allowed priests to visit six Bulgarian medics imprisoned since 1999 for allegedly infecting children with HIV. The medics, convicted and sentenced to death in May 2004, were allowed to worship with the Greek Orthodox priest in Tripoli for Easter on May 1, 2005.

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.

Religious instruction in Islam is required in public schools, but in-depth instruction in other religions is not taught. The Government does not issue information on the religious affiliation of children in public schools, and there were no reports of children transferring to private schools for alternative religious instruction.

There were no reports of Government punishment for apostasy.

The Government monitors and restricts all political activity. It also restricts religious literature, including Islamic literature, published in or allowed into the country.

The country adheres to traditional Islamic law that states: a non-Muslim woman who marries a Muslim man is not required to convert to Islam, although many do so; however, a non-Muslim man must convert to marry a Muslim woman.

Citizens who wish to make the Hajj must be at least 40 years old.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In 2002, the now defunct extrajudicial People's Court in Tripoli sentenced to death Salem Abu Hanak and Abdullah Ahmed Izzedin, 2 out of at least 152 professionals and students who were arbitrarily arrested in 1998 in Benghazi for alleged involvement with Islamic organizations. According to Amnesty International, the men never advocated violence against the Government. An additional 83 received sentences of 10 years to life imprisonment and 66 were acquitted. In December 2004, the Appellate Court confirmed the prison terms and the two death sentences. At the end of the reporting period, the two men sentenced to death were awaiting a decision on their Supreme Court appeal.

All of the above defendants were held incommunicado and their whereabouts remained unknown for more than two years following their detention. Additionally, lawyers for the accused were not allowed to study

their case files or meet with their clients. The lawyers were denied access to the court, and the judge appointed government clerks to replace them.

Some practicing Muslims have shaved their beards to avoid harassment from members of the security services, who tend to associate wearing beards with advocacy of militant Islam aimed at overthrowing the current regime. In the late 1980s, the Government began to pursue a domestic policy directed against Islamic extremists; the events of September 11, 2001 reinforced Qadhafi's view that Islamic militancy is a potential rallying point for opponents of the regime. The security service does not harass those who frequently attend mosque services.

There continued to be reports of armed clashes between security forces and Islamic groups that oppose the regime and advocate the establishment of an Islamic government that would enforce a more conservative form of Islam. There are 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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the reporting year.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Information on the relationship among religions in society is limited, although some members of non-Muslim minority religions reported that they do not face harassment by authorities or the Muslim majority on the basis of religion.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In February 2004, the United States established an official presence in Libya and immediately began discussing religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Additionally, the Embassy established an outreach program to maintain close communication with the leaders of the various religious denominations in the country.

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