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Guinea

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. However, the Government reportedly favored Muslims over non-Muslims.

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

The U.S. government discusses 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 94,926 square miles, and its population is an estimated 9.2 million. Islam is demographically, socially, and culturally the dominant religion. According to credible estimates, approximately 85 percent of the population adhered to Islam, 10 percent followed various Christian faiths, and 5 percent held traditional indigenous beliefs. Muslims generally adhered to the Sunni branch of Islam; there were relatively few adherents of the Shi'a branch, although they were increasing in number. Among the Christian groups, there were Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and other Christian evangelical groups active in the country and recognized by the Government. There was a small Baha'i community. There were small numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, and practitioners of traditional Chinese religions among the expatriate community. Few citizens, if any, professed atheism.

Although there were no known organized heterogeneous or syncretistic religious communities, followers of Islam and Christianity have incorporated syncretistic tendencies into the practice of both, reflecting the continuing influence and acceptability of traditional indigenous beliefs and rituals.

Demographically, Muslims were a majority in all four major regions of the country. Christians were most numerous in Conakry, in the southern part of the country, and in the eastern forest region. Christians were also found in all large towns except those in the Fouta Djallon region in the middle of the country, where the deep cultural entrenchment of Islam in Pular (or Fulani or Peuhl) society made it difficult to establish other religious communities. Traditional indigenous religions were most prevalent in the forest region.

No data were available regarding active participation in formal religious services or rituals, although involvement was high as traditional cultural rituals were often closely tied to religious practices. The Ministry of the National Islamic League estimated that more than 70 percent of Muslims practiced their faith regularly.

The country's large immigrant and refugee populations generally practiced the same faiths as citizens, although those from neighboring Liberia and Sierra Leone had higher percentages of Christians and adherents of traditional indigenous religions.

Foreign missionary groups were active in the country and included Catholic, Philafricaine, Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, and many U.S. missionary societies.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or

private actors.

There is no state religion; however, some believed the Government favors Muslims over non-Muslims through its support of the Ministry of the National Islamic League.

Both Muslim and Christian holy days are recognized by the Government and celebrated by the population. Holy days celebrated as national holidays include Easter, Assumption Day, Christmas, Tabaski, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Ramadan.

The Government-controlled official press, which includes the *Horoya* newspaper and the Guinean Radio and TV network, reports on religious events involving Islamic and Christian groups. On August 20, 2005, President Conte signed the decree authorizing private radio and television broadcasting but prohibiting ownership by religious groups or political parties. The Ministry of Information confirmed, however, that religious and political broadcasting would be permitted on privately owned, commercial radio. The Government allocated seventy-five minutes per week for both Muslim and Christian programming on state-owned, national television.

All religious groups newly operating in the country are required to register with the Ministry of Territorial Administration. Only one religious group, suspected to be linked to an extremist network, was denied recognition. Registration entitles religious organizations to value-added tax (VAT) exemptions on incoming shipments and some energy subsidies. Unregistered religious groups continued to operate in the country; however, they are not entitled to VAT exemptions and other benefits available to registered groups. Also, unregistered religious groups are subject to government expulsion, a penalty with limited opportunity for legal appeal. In practice, no groups have been expelled.

Islamic organizations are also required to register with the Ministry of the National Islamic League. The ministry reported that it denied only one of the applications, from a U.K.-based group, prohibiting the organization to practice in the country. This was the same group denied recognition by the Ministry of Territorial Administration.

The small Baha'i community practiced its faith openly and freely, although it was not officially recognized. It was unknown whether the community had asked for official recognition.

Like other religious groups seeking government recognition, missionary groups are required to apply and declare their aims and activities to the Ministry of Territorial Administration. Most new missionary groups join the Association of Churches and Missions in Guinea (AEMEG) and receive assistance in fulfilling the administrative requirements of the recognition process.

With rare exceptions, foreign missionary groups and church-affiliated relief agencies operated freely in the country.

During the period covered by this report, the Government continued to require foreign members of missionary and church groups, without diplomatic status, to pay a visa fee. The past policy of waiving visa fees for members of church groups no longer applied.

All private schools are required to register with the Ministry of Pre-University and Civic Education. The Service for Statistics and Planning, which is part of the Ministry of Pre-University and Civic Education, officially monitors all secular and religious private schools to ensure they follow the standard national curriculum. Due to the high demand for education and the inadequate supply of teachers and schools in urban areas, the number of unregistered private schools grew. Because of limited government resources, unregistered schools were not closed but rather were either neglected or ignored by government authorities. However, students at unregistered schools may graduate without any recognized credentials or certificates. While there were some government-financed "Franco-Arab" schools, all of which included religious instruction in their curriculum, the vast majority of students attended secular public schools.

There is a general tradition of Qur'anic schools throughout the country. Qur'anic schools are particularly strong in the Fouta Djallon region, which was ruled as an Islamic theocracy during the eighteenth century.

There are a few scattered madrassahs across the country, schools usually associated with a mosque. Private radical Islamic groups sponsored some of these schools with foreign funds. The madrassahs were not formally linked with the public school system; however, some of these schools offered a comparable curriculum for primary education. In general, they were not recognized by the Government. As with other private schools, madrassahs may be closed arbitrarily, since they do not have official recognition.

Missionaries also operate their own schools with no interference from the Government. Catholic and Protestant schools are located primarily in Conakry, but there are some throughout the rest of country as well. Christian missionary schools teach the national curriculum (which is not influenced by religion) and include a special education component for Christians.

The Government did not have a specific program to promote interfaith understanding. The former government Inter-

Religious Council, composed of members from Anglican, Catholic, and Protestant churches and the Ministry of the National Islamic League, suspended its activities. However, the Government invited all religious groups to participate in its civic education efforts and included different religious groups in its national prayers for peace.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Ministry of the National Islamic League represents the country's Sunni Muslim majority. The ministry's stated policy is to promote better relations with other religious denominations and dialogue aimed at ameliorating interethnic and interreligious tensions. The Government has spoken out against the proliferation of Shi'a fundamentalist groups on the grounds that they "generate confusion and deviation" within the country's Islamic family. At the end of the period covered by this report, the foreign-funded Shi'a Islamic school to which the Government denied permission to open in 2004 remained closed; otherwise, the religious activities of Shi'a groups were not restricted. There were Shi'a officials represented in the Ministry of the National Islamic League.

Government support of Islam through the Ministry of the National Islamic League led some non-Muslims to claim the Government uses its influence to favor Muslims over non-Muslims. The Government sometimes provides assistance such as vehicles and lodging for events involving other faith groups, and it has approved funding for members of the Association of Churches and Evangelic Missions in Guinea. However, some were dissatisfied that no official governmental entity existed for non-Muslim religions. Non-Muslims were represented in the cabinet, administrative bureaucracy, and armed forces; however, the Government refrained from appointing non-Muslims to important administrative positions in certain parts of the country, in deference to the strong social dominance of Islam in these regions.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

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 Abuses and Discrimination

Relations among the various religious groups generally were amicable; however, in some parts of the country, Islam's dominance was such that there was strong social pressure that discouraged conversion from Islam. There were reports that this pressure sometimes limited or retarded efforts to acquire land for religious use by other faiths.

In October 2005 there was religiously motivated violence between the predominantly Muslim Koniankes and the predominantly Christian Guerzes in N'Zerekore in the Forest Region. During Ramadan, violence erupted after the Koniankes complained that music from a Guerze baptism disturbed prayers at a nearby mosque. Several persons were injured and property destroyed, and police detained approximately fifty persons. Some of the detainees were held for approximately two weeks and charged with disorderly conduct. All were released, some only after repair costs were reimbursed, and some had legal cases pending.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy maintains contact with clergy and religious leaders from all major religious communities and monitors developments affecting religious freedom. The mission initiated a partnership with the Ministry of the National Islamic League and representatives from both organizations meet regularly to discuss issues and develop programs of mutual concern.

The embassy sponsored lectures and seminars that provided information on the religious diversity found in American society. The embassy regularly includes members of the Islamic League in public outreach programming because mosques play an important role in disseminating information in local communities. The embassy distributed remaining copies of the U.S. government-sponsored Arabic language magazine *Hi* to imams and mosques and a former International Visitor Program grantee moderated a program to introduce *Hi Magazine* to community leaders and students. The director of the Islamic Center in Kankan gave an interview to Rural Radio and a lecture in Malinke language about his very positive experience on an International Visitor program on leadership in the Muslim community. A particularly intense debate on ways to foster mutual understanding was launched within the forum of an embassy-sponsored book discussion.

The ambassador and other U.S. officials raised religious freedom concerns with the Minister of the National Islamic League, the senior imam of Conakry, and religious leaders outside the capital.

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