

# **SENEGAL 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for the free practice of religious beliefs and self-governance by religious groups without government interference. Following the November arrest of two imams suspected of links to Boko Haram, the president stated there is a need to train imams with a sense of tolerant Islam. The government requires registration of religious and other groups, and provides funding for Islamic and Christian schools and pilgrimages.

There were no reports of significant societal developments affecting religious freedom.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials promoted religious pluralism through engagement with religious leaders, religious groups, government, and civil society. The embassy sponsored the visit of a U.S. Muslim scholar fluent in the most widely spoken local language, who conducted an outreach program to share the U.S. experience with pluralism and Islam with local audiences.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 13.9 million (July 2015 estimate). Approximately 94 percent of the population is Muslim. Most Muslims are Sunni and belong to one of several Sufi brotherhoods, each of which incorporates unique practices. Approximately 5 percent of the population is Christian. Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Protestants, and groups combining Christian and indigenous beliefs. The remaining 1 percent exclusively adheres to indigenous religions or professes no religion.

Muslims make up the predominant religious community throughout the country; the small Christian minority is located in towns in the west and south. Members of indigenous religious groups live mainly in the east and south.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution specifically defines the country as a secular state and provides for the free practice of religious beliefs, provided public order is maintained, as well as

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self-governance by religious groups free from state interference. The constitution prohibits political parties from identifying with a specific religion.

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 groups, religious or otherwise, must register with the interior ministry to acquire legal status as an association. To register, groups must provide documentation showing they have been in existence for at least two years as an association. Groups must also provide a mission statement, bylaws, a list of goals, objectives, and 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 many forms of taxation.

The law requires domestic associations, including religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) affiliated with them, to obtain authorization to operate from the Ministry of Women, Family, and Social Development. Foreign NGOs must obtain authorization from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### **Government Practices**

According to international reports, in November officials reported two imams were charged with money-laundering and were suspected to have ties with Boko Haram. A week later, President Macky Sall stated that people should have the courage to fight “excessive” forms of Islam. The president also stated there was a need to train imams with a sense of tolerant Islam.

The government provided direct financial and material assistance to religious groups, primarily to maintain or rehabilitate places of worship or to underwrite special events. There was no formal procedure for applying for assistance. All religious groups had access to these funds and often competed on an ad hoc basis to obtain them.

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The government encouraged and assisted Muslim participation in the Hajj, providing imams with hundreds of free airplane tickets for the pilgrimage for distribution among citizens. The government provided assistance for an annual Roman Catholic pilgrimage to the Vatican, the Palestinian territories, and Israel. The Catholic Church reported that the government provided 358 million CFA francs (\$594,000) for 338 Christian pilgrims who traveled to the Vatican in August and September.

The government allowed up to four hours of voluntary religious education per week in public elementary schools. Parents could choose either a Christian or Muslim curriculum. Students had the option to opt out of the curriculum. The Ministry of Education reported slightly more than a million students participated in religious education through the public elementary school system.

The education ministry provided partial funding to schools operated by religious groups that met national education standards. Established Christian schools with strong academic reputations received the largest share of this government funding. The majority of students attending Christian schools were Muslim. The government also funded a number of Islamic schools which enrolled approximately 60,000 students.

The Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Women, Family and Social Development monitored domestic associations, including religious groups and NGOs affiliated with them, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs monitored foreign-based NGOs, including those affiliated with religious groups, to ensure they were operating within the terms of their registration. The ministries required the submission of an annual report, including a financial report.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

Through engagement with religious leaders, including leaders of the main Islamic brotherhoods, religious groups, government, and civil society, the U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials promoted and helped facilitate freedom of religion and societal respect for religious freedom. The Ambassador met with the

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leaders of the three largest Sufi brotherhoods, and discussed efforts to promote religious tolerance. The Ambassador also met with Christian religious leaders who told him about the peaceful relations among different religions in the country.

During Ramadan, the Ambassador hosted an iftar to which he invited both Muslim and Christian leaders, as well as leaders of grassroots Islamic organizations, and government officials responsible for religious issues for a discussion of the importance of interfaith friendship and religious freedom.

Also during Ramadan, the embassy sponsored the visit of a U.S. Muslim scholar fluent in Wolof, the most widely spoken local language. The scholar conducted an outreach program on pluralism and Islam in the United States, including a presentation at an iftar, hosted by an embassy officer in Kaolack, to which both Muslim and Christian leaders were invited. The scholar also gave presentations at schools belonging to the two largest Islamic brotherhoods, conducted a public outreach event to a third brotherhood, and another to the Islamic Institute in Dakar. All these events were widely covered in both print and broadcast media, which also said the country had a good record of interfaith harmony.