

SENEGAL 2017 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. By law all faith-based organizations must register with the government to acquire legal status as an association. The government campaign against forced child begging at some Islamic religious schools had limited success, according to observers. The government continued its programs to assist religious groups to maintain places of worship, to fund and facilitate participation in the Hajj, and to fund schools operated by religious groups. The government continued to monitor religious groups to ensure they operated according to the terms of their registration.

Local and international NGOs continued their efforts to focus attention on the abuse of children at some traditional Islamic religious schools (known as *daaras*), including through forced begging, and urged the government to address the problem through more effective regulation and prosecution of offending teachers.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers met with government officials to discuss conditions faced by students at *daaras* as well as the government's efforts to combat forced child begging. The Ambassador and embassy officers also discussed these issues with religious leaders and civil society representatives. In meetings with civil society and religious leaders, including leaders of the main Islamic brotherhoods, embassy officers continued to emphasize the importance of maintaining religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 14.7 million (July 2017 estimate). According to government statistics from 2014, 96.1 percent of the population is Muslim. Most Muslims are Sunni and belong to one of several Sufi brotherhoods, each of which incorporates unique practices, while a small number of Muslims are Shia (5,000 individuals, according to one unofficial 2011 estimate). Approximately 3.8 percent of the population is Christian. Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Protestants, and groups combining Christian and indigenous beliefs. The remaining 0.1 percent exclusively adheres to indigenous religions or professes no religion.

The 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 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 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, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) representing religious groups, must register with the interior ministry to acquire legal status as an association. To register, organizations must provide documentation showing they have been in existence for at least two years as an association. Organizations 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 associations, including religious organizations and NGOs affiliated with them, to obtain authorization from the Ministry of Women, Family, and Gender in order to operate. This second registration requirement allows the government to monitor organizations operating in the field of social development and identify any interventions these organizations implement. Foreign NGOs must obtain authorization from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

By law religious education may be proposed in public and private schools, and parents have the option to enroll their children in the program.

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

Government Practices

Until funding resources were no longer available in the middle of the year, the government continued its campaign, begun in 2016, to implement a 2005 law forbidding forced child begging as practiced at some traditional Islamic schools. The campaign had met with limited success according to observers, many of whom criticized its efficacy, saying the campaign had focused strictly on removing child beggars from the streets rather than on addressing the conditions under which children were forced to beg, or prosecuting individuals who forced children to beg. Once funds for the campaign were depleted, the government suspended its implementation.

The government continued to provide direct financial and material assistance to religious groups, for use primarily in maintaining or rehabilitating places of worship or for underwriting special events. There continued to be no formal procedure for applying for assistance. All religious groups continued to have access to these funds and often competed on an ad hoc basis to obtain them. President Macky Sall occasionally visited beneficiaries of these funds.

The government continued to encourage and assist Muslim participation in the Hajj, again providing imams with hundreds of free airplane tickets for the pilgrimage for distribution among citizens. There were no reliable estimates of the number of tickets the government provided. In addition to these free tickets, the government organized trips to the Hajj for approximately 1,500 of the 10,500 Senegalese who participated. The government also again provided assistance for an annual Roman Catholic pilgrimage to the Vatican, the Palestinian territories, and Israel. The Catholic Church reported the government provided 370 million CFA francs (\$658,000) for Senegalese Catholic pilgrims who traveled to the Vatican in August and September, compared with 368 million CFA francs (\$654,000) in 2016.

The government continued to permit up to four hours of voluntary religious education per week in public and private elementary schools. Parents were able to choose either a Christian or an Islamic curriculum. The possibility also remained for students to opt out of the curriculum. The Ministry of Education reported slightly more than a million students again participated in religious education through the public elementary school system during the year.

The Ministry of Education continued to provide partial funding to schools operated by religious groups that met national education standards. It provided the largest share of this funding to established Christian schools with strong academic reputations. The majority of students attending Christian schools continued to be Muslim. The government also continued to fund a number of Islamic schools, which enrolled approximately 60,000 students.

The Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Women, Family, and Gender continued to monitor domestic associations, including religious groups and NGOs affiliated with them, to ensure they operated according to the terms of their registration, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to do the same with foreign-based NGOs, including those affiliated with religious groups. Each association submitted an annual report, including a financial report, which the ministries used in their effort to track potential funding of terrorist groups. There were no reports of the government revoking the registration of any association for operating outside the terms of its registration.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Local and international NGOs continued to highlight abuses of students at some *daaras*, where young children sometimes resided. Some *daaras* reportedly continued to force children to beg. Local media and NGOs continued to document physical and sexual abuse of *daara* students. Civil society and children's rights advocates reprised their appeals to the government to implement more effective regulation of Quranic schools and to prosecute teachers who committed serious violations against children.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to meet with government officials in Dakar and with local authorities in Saint Louis to discuss conditions faced by *daara* students as well as the government's efforts to combat forced child begging. The Ambassador and embassy officers also met with civil society representatives and religious leaders in the central regions of Kaolack and Kaffrine and in the Casamance region to discuss these issues. As part of their continuing engagement with religious leaders, including leaders of the main Islamic brotherhoods, as well as with civil society, embassy officers emphasized the importance of maintaining religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue.

During Ramadan the embassy hosted a series of iftars in Dakar and Ziguinchor, geared to different audiences, and focusing on diversity, religious tolerance and inclusion, and highlighting the need to engage in dialogue across religious lines. Attendees at the different events included local government officials, youth leaders, religious leaders, NGO representatives, and other members of civil society.