

GAMBIA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the freedom of religious choice, as long as doing so does not impinge on the rights of others or the national interest. It prohibits religious discrimination, establishment of a state religion, and formation of political parties based on religious affiliation. In separate meetings with Muslim and Christian leaders during religious holidays, President Adama Barrow stressed the need for continued religious freedom and tolerance. In October Minister of Information and Communications Ebrima Sillah spoke at the 2nd Annual Ahmadiyya Peace Conference in Banjul and recognized the efforts of the Ahmadiyya in “standing by the people and government of The Gambia.”

There continued to be tension between the majority Sunni Muslim community and the minority Ahmadiyya Muslim community. The Supreme Islamic Council (SIC), a religious body tasked with providing Islamic religious guidance, continued to state the Ahmadiyya community did not belong to Islam, and it did not include members of the community in its events and activities.

In April two U.S. Army chaplains met with military chaplains from different faiths to discuss religious support for members of the military and the integration of religious support personnel into operations. Embassy officers held several meetings and events with religious leaders of different faith groups to emphasize the importance of continued religious tolerance. The embassy held two iftars attended by religious, civil society, and senior government representatives, and a December reception to honor celebrants of Christmas and Hanukah.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (midyear 2019 estimate). Approximately 95.7 percent of the population is Muslim, most of whom are Sunni. The Christian community makes up 4.2 percent of the population, the majority Roman Catholics. Religious groups that together constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Ahmadi Muslims, Baha’is, Hindus, and Eckankar members. Some individuals mix indigenous beliefs with Islam and Christianity.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states, “Every person shall have the freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice” subject to laws that may impose such “reasonable restrictions” as necessary for national security, public order, decency, or morality. The constitution also states that such freedom “not impinge on the rights and freedoms of others or on the national interest, especially unity.” The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, the establishment of a state religion, and religiously based political parties. It provides for the establishment of *qadi* courts, with judges trained in the Islamic legal tradition. The courts are located in each of the country’s seven regions, and their jurisdiction applies only to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance where the involved parties are Muslims. Citizens may choose to use either the civil or *qadi* courts.

There are no formal guidelines for registration of religious groups. Religious groups that do not provide social services are not legally required to register. Faith-based groups that provide social services as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must meet the same eligibility criteria as other NGOs. By law, all NGOs are required to register with the NGO Affairs Agency and register as charities at the attorney general’s chambers under the Companies Act. They are required to have governing boards of directors of at least seven members responsible for policy and major administrative decisions, including internal control. The NGO decree requires that all NGOs submit to the NGO Affairs Agency a detailed annual work program and budget, a detailed annual report highlighting progress on activities undertaken during the year, work plans for the following year, and financial statements audited by NGO Affairs Agency-approved auditors. The government has stated the submissions help the NGO Affairs Agency monitor NGO activities.

The law does not require public or private schools to include religious instruction in their curricula. The government, through the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, provides religious education teachers to public schools to teach an academic course on major world religions. The majority of public schools offer this course and most students take the class. Some private schools also offer classes in religious education and tolerance and provide an overview of major world religions.

The constitution bans political parties organized on the basis of religion.

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

Government Practices

President Barrow met separately throughout the year with leaders of the Muslim and Christian communities and stressed his administration's commitment to promoting religious tolerance, according to media reports. The president called for the "preservation of the admirable mutual respect, trust, and unity among different religious groups" during a January meeting with the Christian Council. The president attended religious celebrations with Muslim and Christian leaders, including prayers at the country's central mosque to mark the Islamic holidays of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. The president gave a televised statement at Christmas.

On October 19, Minister of Information and Communications Sillah represented the government at the 2nd Annual Ahmadiyya Peace Conference Africa 2019. He congratulated the Ahmadiyya for "standing for and by the people and the Government of the Gambia."

The Ministry of Lands and Regional Affairs continued to oversee the portfolio of religious affairs.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

SIC leaders stated that all religious organizations in the country were entitled to freedom of expression and assembly, although they continued to state that Ahmadi Muslims did not belong to Islam and therefore did not include Ahmadi members in SIC events. Ahmadi Muslims said they believed themselves free to practice their religion without interference but expressed frustration with the SIC's refusal to integrate them into the broader Muslim community.

Intermarriage between Muslims and Christians continued to be common. It was not uncommon for persons of different faiths to live in the same dwelling, and observers said religious differences were widely accepted among family members and neighbors.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly met with government officials and Muslim (both Sunni and Ahmadi) and Christian religious leaders to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. In April two U.S. Army chaplains conducted a military-to-military program with Muslim and Christian chaplains during which they discussed the integration of religious support personnel into

military operations and shared best practices on the challenges of providing religious support to military members.

During Ramadan, the embassy held two iftars attended by religious, civil society, and senior government representatives. The embassy also held a reception in December in honor of those celebrating Christmas and Hanukah that was attended by representatives of various faiths, civil society organizations, and government ministries. The ambassador and other embassy officials used the events to encourage religious and government representatives to continue to communicate in an open and respectful manner.