

SENEGAL 2020 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 continued a campaign to combat forced child begging, which often takes place at some Islamic schools. The government did not ban the October Magal Muslim pilgrimage to the religious city of Touba. The leader of the Mourides Sufi brotherhood, Serigne Mountakha Mbacke, issued a call for pilgrims to travel to attend with the full support of the government, despite the pandemic. As part of the government's strategy to contain COVID-19, President Macky Sall in mid-March ordered houses of worship to close, prompting at least one protest by hundreds of worshippers at a mosque in a Dakar neighborhood. The restrictions were eased in mid-May and houses of worship were allowed to reopen. The government continued to assist religious groups to maintain places of worship, to permit four hours of voluntary religious education at public and private schools, and to fund schools operated by religious groups. The government also continued to monitor religious groups to ensure they operated according to the terms of their registration.

In September, a group of Christians lodged a complaint in court against Imam Galadio Ka for defamatory and offensive speech at a public religious conference in 2018. In his remarks, which circulated widely, Ka said, "The Christian minority in the country was responsible for legalizing alcohol, adultery, homosexuality, and usury." In explaining the decision to seek justice in court, the Christian group said, "Ka's words, beyond insulting our faith, [are seen] as an unbearable attack on the society of tolerance and cordial coexistence for which our country is famous." Local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued efforts to focus attention on the abuse of children, including forced child begging, at some traditional Islamic schools (known locally as *daaras*). These organizations continued to urge the government to address the problem through more effective regulation and prosecution of offending teachers.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers met with federal and local government officials in Dakar to discuss conditions *daara* students faced, as well as the government's efforts to combat forced child begging. The meetings also included discussion on the resilience of religious communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ambassador and embassy officers also discussed these issues

with religious leaders and civil society representatives in Ziguinchor, Touba, and Tivaouane. The embassy sponsored two webinars with the Timbuktu Institute on combating violent religious extremism and promoting understanding and tolerance among youth in the Casamance region and Dakar. In meetings with civil society and religious leaders, 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 15.7 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to 2016 government statistics, 95.9 percent of the population identifies as Muslim. Most Muslims are Sunni and belong to one of several Sufi brotherhoods, each of which incorporates unique practices, including some aspects of indigenous beliefs. Within the Muslim population there are 30,000-50,000 Shia Muslims, according to an unofficial 2017 estimate from the secretary general of the AhlouBayt Shia movement. Approximately 4.1 percent of the population is Christian. Christian groups include Catholics, Protestants, and groups combining Christian and indigenous beliefs.

Most Christians live in towns in the west 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, including religious groups and NGOs representing religious groups, must register with the Ministry of Interior 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, 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 taxation on donations received.

The law requires associations, including religious groups 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, including those affiliated with religious groups, must also obtain an authorization from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

By law, religious education may be offered in public and private schools, and parents have the option to enroll their children in the program. The government permits up to four hours of voluntary religious education per week in public and private elementary schools. The government allows parents to choose either an Islamic or Christian curriculum. There is an opt-out available for parents who do not wish their children to attend.

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

Government Practices

As part of the government's strategy to contain COVID-19, President Macky Sall in mid-March closed down mosques and churches, prompting at least one protest by hundreds of worshippers at a Dakar neighborhood mosque. The restrictions were eased in mid-May and houses of worship were allowed to reopen.

Some Muslim religious leaders continued to oppose child protection bill pending in the National Assembly since 2016. The pending bill calls for increased child protection services and measures to combat the trafficking of children, an abuse that the NGO Anti-Slavery stated occurred in some Quranic schools, or *daaras*. The government continued to work closely with Muslim religious leaders to gain support for the campaign and for other initiatives. A draft bill introduced by the government in 2018 to regulate the status of *daaras* also remained pending and was

not introduced to the National Assembly. Civil society and children's rights advocates continued to appeal to the government to pass new legislation to regulate daaras more effectively and to prosecute Quranic teachers who committed serious abuses against children, including forced begging and physical and sexual abuse.

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 competed on an ad hoc basis to obtain them. President Macky Sall occasionally visited and supported beneficiaries of these funds.

The government did not ban the October Magal Muslim pilgrimage to the religious city of Touba. The leader of the Mourides Sufi brotherhood, Serigne Mountakha Mbacke, issued the call for pilgrims to attend despite the pandemic. Prior to the event, the government expressed approval of the event, noting the organizers would deploy 500 persons throughout the city to ensure compliance with pandemic mitigation efforts. Although the crowd was noticeably smaller than the millions that typically participate, tens of thousands of pilgrims gathered at the Great Mosque in Touba, including government ministers and dignitaries.

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, which in general maintained strong academic reputations. The majority of students attending Christian schools continued to be Muslim. The Ministry of Education reported approximately 50 percent of primary school students again participated in religious education through the public elementary school system during the year. The government also continued to fund a number of Islamic schools, which officially enrolled approximately 60,000 students. There were 316 registered Catholic schools, accommodating approximately 120,000 students. Local experts noted that unregistered Islamic schools outnumbered Catholic schools, as many parents informally sent their children to these establishments to learn the Quran.

The Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Women, Family, Gender, and Child Protection continued to monitor domestic associations, including religious groups and NGOs affiliated with them, to ensure they operated according to the terms of their registration. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued the same practice with foreign-based NGOs, including those affiliated with religious groups. Each

association submitted an annual report, including a financial report, which the ministries used to track potential threats against national security.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In September, a group of Christians led by Ephrem Manga lodged a complaint in court against Imam Galadio Ka for defamatory and offensive rhetoric in a speech at a public religious conference in 2018. In his remarks, which circulated widely by video, Ka said, “The Christian minority in the country was responsible for legalizing alcohol, adultery, homosexuality, and usury.” In explaining his decision to seek justice in court, Manga said “...Galadio Ka’s words, beyond insulting our faith, [are seen] as an unbearable attack on the society of tolerance and cordial coexistence for which our country is famous.” The trial was set for late November.

Local and international NGOs continued to highlight abuses of students at some daaras, where young children sometimes resided to learn Quranic teachings. The government allocated 250 million CFA francs (\$470,000) to a “Zero Children in the Street” project to raise awareness of and provide services to street children/forced child beggars with additional funding provided by others. As of year’s end, the program had sheltered more than 5,000 street children ages four to 17 throughout the country. The problem of forced begging remained widespread, according to several NGOs.

Local media and NGOs continued to report cases of physical and sexual abuse of daara students by some *marabouts*, or Quranic schoolteachers. For example, a 2019 Human Rights Watch report cited 16 deaths due to abuse or neglect, as well as dozens of cases of beatings, sexual abuse, and children chained or imprisoned in religious schools. In some communities, religious, NGO, and local government leaders sought to combat the problem. Local women’s groups also assisted in the care of children within daaras to prevent child begging.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers met with federal and local government officials to discuss conditions daara students faced, as well as the government’s efforts to combat forced child begging. Discussions also included the resilience of religious communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Embassy officials also met with religious leaders in Dakar and with local religious authorities in Ziguinchor, Touba, and Tivaouane to discuss forced child begging, daara conditions, and COVID-19-related issues.

The embassy sponsored the participation of 10 religious and educational leaders in a virtual discussion with U.S. officials on education, resilience, respect, and inclusion. It also sponsored two webinars with the Timbuktu Institute on combating violent religious extremism and promoting positive dialogue, understanding, and tolerance among youth in the Casamance region and Dakar.

The embassy supported several local women-led groups that helped care for children in daaras to prevent child begging, and supported efforts by local governments in Dakar to support and monitor daaras. Embassy officers visited a Quranic boarding school in Kaolack and discussed the issue of forced child begging. The Ambassador awarded the school's director with the Ambassador's Award for Excellence in Education.