

SENEGAL 2021 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 to work with Muslim religious leaders in a campaign to stop abuses against children in some Quranic schools or *daaras*, but child protection legislation proposed in 2016 and 2018 remained pending. For a second year, the government allowed the October Magal Muslim pilgrimage to the religious city of Touba to be held without restrictions, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. 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 encourage religious groups to register through the Ministry of Interior to receive legal status.

In April, in a village in the western part of the country, a spokesperson for a local Christian community filed a police complaint against a Muslim cleric, accusing him of inflammatory preaching and attempting to convert members of the predominately Catholic local community to Islam. The national gendarmerie intervened in subsequent clashes between members of the cleric's mosque and village youth. Local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to focus attention on the abuse of children, including forced child begging, at some *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 regularly with senior government officials to discuss conditions faced by students (known locally as *talibe*) 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 Dakar and across the country. In meetings with civil society and religious leaders, including leaders of the main Islamic brotherhoods, embassy officers emphasized the importance of religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue. The embassy sponsored a film workshop in which one of the short films focused on educating the public about the daily living conditions of *talibe* and encouraged policy makers to protect Quranic students better from forced child begging. With the Timbuktu Institute, the embassy again

sponsored a webinar for participants from the Casamance region to promote positive dialogue, understanding, and tolerance among youth from different religious backgrounds.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.1 million (midyear 2021), with 95.9 percent of the population identifying as Muslim, according to government statistics. Most Muslims are Sunni and belong to one of several Sufi brotherhoods, each of which incorporates unique practices, including some aspects of indigenous beliefs. Although figures vary, a 2021 study estimates there are one million Shia Muslims in the country, or approximately 6 percent of the population. Approximately 3.6 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 the self-governance by religious groups free from state interference. The constitution prohibits political parties from identifying with a specific religion. It states religious freedom must be respected and 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, Gender and Child Protection in order to operate. This second registration requirement allows the government to monitor organizations operating in the field of social development and to identify any programs 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. 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

The government continued to work closely with Muslim religious leaders in a campaign to stop abuses against children in some daaras. 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 forcing them to beg and abusing them physically and sexually. A draft bill introduced by the government in 2018 to regulate the status of daaras and opposed by some Muslim religious leaders remained pending and was not introduced in the National Assembly. Some Muslim religious leaders also continued to oppose a child protection bill pending in the National Assembly since 2016 because portions of the bill called for government inspection of religious schools and revision of the curriculum taught at those schools. The pending bill called for increased child protection services and measures to combat the trafficking of children, an abuse that the NGO Human Rights Watch stated also occurred in some daaras.

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.

For a second year, the government allowed the October Magal Muslim pilgrimage to the religious city of Touba to take place without restrictions, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The leader of the Mourides Sufi brotherhood, Serigne Mountakha Mbacke, issued the call for pilgrims to attend with the government's full support.

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 who attended Christian schools continued to be Muslim. The Ministry of Education reported approximately 50 percent of primary school students 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, attended by approximately 120,000 students. Local experts noted that unregistered Islamic schools outnumbered Catholic schools, as many parents informally send 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 require registration of 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.

In May, several Islamic associations and civil society groups held a large rally in support of proposed legislation to strengthen existing laws against same-sex sexual activity, which is a crime under Senegalese law punishable by up to five years in prison. According to media reports, a religious group representative said that the country "is homophobic and will remain so forever." One imam said the issue should be addressed in future elections, stating, "Any candidate who does not take

this concern into account must be rejected as clearly evil.” In December, legislation that would have institutionalized harsher penalties for homosexuality was introduced in parliament but failed to gain broader support and was rejected.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In April, the spokesperson for the local Christian community, Guy Martial Diagne, filed a police complaint against *marabout* (Quranic teacher) Serigne Bara Sene in Diohine in the western part of the country, accusing him of inflammatory preaching while also attempting to convert members of the predominately Catholic local community to Islam. Media said Bara Sene was also inciting violence against Catholics in his sermons. The national gendarmerie intervened in subsequent clashes between members of Sene’s mosque and village youth. Officials summoned a local chief as an intermediary to end the conflict. The issue was resolved after the cleric’s father apologized and requested that his son leave the village immediately, which he did. Local faith-based leaders also requested calm.

The country’s religious leaders continued to place a high value on tolerance and peaceful coexistence among faith-based communities. The Khalifa of Medina, Baye Cheikh Mahi Nass, reiterated this message in a November 20 speech, stating, “Senegal belongs to us. It is the duty of everyone to preserve it by banning all forms of violence, wherever they come from, and by cultivating ... tolerance, peace, and work well done, for the development of this country.”

Local and international NGOs continued to highlight abuses of talibes at some daaras, where young children residing to learn Quranic teachings were sometimes forced by school leaders to beg on the streets to collect funds for the daaras. The problem of forced begging in daaras 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. For example, a 2021 study by the NGO ENACTafrica said that some marabouts severely beat children who failed to collect a daily quota of alms. In some communities, religious, NGO, and local government leaders sought to combat the problem. The government continued to support a program of removing children from the streets, placing them in shelters, or returning them to their parents. 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 embassy officers met regularly with senior government officials from the Ministries of Justice, and Women, Children and Families to discuss conditions faced by students at daaras and 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 Dakar and across the country. In meetings with civil society and religious leaders, including leaders of the main Islamic brotherhoods, embassy officers continued to emphasize the importance of religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue.

The embassy sponsored a film workshop for young filmmakers creating short films to inspire social change. One of the films focused on educating the public about the daily living conditions of talibe and encouraged policy makers to better protect Quranic students from being forced to beg for alms for their schools. With the Timbuktu Institute, the embassy again sponsored a webinar for participants from the Casamance region to promote positive dialogue, understanding, and tolerance among youth from different religious backgrounds.

The embassy continued to support several local women-led groups that helped care for children in daaras to prevent child begging and promoted efforts by local governments in Dakar to support and monitor daaras.