

SENEGAL 2019 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 also continued its programs to assist religious groups to maintain places of worship, fund and facilitate participation in the Hajj and Roman Catholic pilgrimages, permit four hours of voluntary religious education at public and private schools, and fund schools operated by religious groups. The government continued to monitor religious groups to ensure they operated according to the terms of their registration. Several draft laws related to child begging at religious schools awaited National Assembly ratification. The government provided \$11 million of in-kind assistance toward the construction of the new Massalikul Jinaan Mosque, the largest in West Africa.

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 U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with senior government officials to discuss conditions students faced in *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 throughout the country. 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 15.4 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to 2016 government statistics, 95.9 percent of the population is Muslim. Most Muslims are Sunni and belong to one of several Sufi brotherhoods, each of which incorporates unique practices. There are between 30,000 and 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. 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, 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. For example, the new \$35-million Massalikul Jinaan Mosque received a tax exemption for the imported materials used in its construction.

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 obtain 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 a Christian or an Islamic curriculum. Parents may opt out their children from attending.

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

Government Practices

The government continued working on a child protection bill pending in the National Assembly since 2016 and forbidding forced child begging, an abuse occurring 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 approve and implement the law in order 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. For example, the government provided \$11 million of in-kind assistance for land, lighting, sanitation, and road infrastructure for the construction of the new Massalikul Jinaan Mosque, the largest in West Africa, maintained by the Mouride (Sufi) religious brotherhood in Dakar.

The government continued to assist Muslim participation in the Hajj and again provided imams with hundreds of free airplane tickets for the pilgrimage for

distribution among citizens. The government also organized Hajj trips for approximately 2,000 additional individuals. The government continued to provide assistance for an annual Catholic pilgrimage to the Vatican, the Palestinian territories, and Israel and assisted 350 individuals with 300,000 CFA francs (\$520) each. The Catholic Church reported the government provided 380 million CFA francs (\$653,000) for travel to the Vatican, the same level as the previous 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, 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 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. 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 funding of terrorist groups.

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 to learn Quranic teachings. Some *daaras* reportedly continued to force children to beg. The problem of forced begging remained widespread, according to the Global Solidarity Initiative, which in a 2018 study of Dakar *daaras*, estimated 28,000 children in the capital were forced to beg daily. A 2019 Human Rights Watch report estimated that over 100,000 children throughout the country were forced to beg daily.

Local media and NGOs continued to report cases of physical and sexual abuse of *daara* students by some *marabouts*, or Quranic schoolteachers. Some communities engaged local actors, such as religious and local government leaders, to combat the problem; in some communities, local women helped care for children in *daaras* to prevent child begging.

In August the Muslim community held an interfaith *Tabaski*, the local name for Eid al-Adha, a celebration in which a meal of sheep is shared: a third each for the family, neighbors, and the poor.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to meet with federal and local government officials in Dakar and with local authorities in Saint Louis to discuss conditions *daara* students faced 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 Dakar to discuss these issues. The embassy and a visiting U.S. military chaplain hosted a roundtable discussion in July with seven Muslim and Catholic religious leaders, emphasizing the importance of maintaining religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue.

The embassy sponsored two local religious leaders to attend the First Regional Conference on Cultural Heritage Protection for Religious Communities in Rabat, Morocco. During Ramadan, the Ambassador and other senior embassy officials hosted an iftar for members of the local arts community focusing on diversity and another with the LGBTI community focused on religious tolerance and inclusion. Local government officials, youth leaders, religious leaders, NGO representatives, and other members of civil society attended these events.