

SENEGAL 2016 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. The government requires registration of religious and other groups, and provides funding for Islamic and Christian schools and pilgrimages. In June a court in Kolda convicted an Islamic preacher of glorifying terrorism, incitement to civil disobedience, and religious intolerance, and sentenced him to one year in jail; following an appeal, his sentence was increased in October to 30 months. In October a French national was arrested for “insulting” Islam and was held in Dakar’s Rebeuss Prison. In October the Court of Dakar delivered a suspended six-month sentence to Imam Cheikh Mbacke Sakho for insulting the country’s Mouride brotherhood. On July 28, President Macky Sall invited Islamic scholars to deliver a “doctrinal response” to those who used religion to justify their acts of terrorism.

A coalition of children’s rights NGOs focused attention on the abuse of children at some Quranic schools, including through forced begging, and urged the government to address the problem through more effective regulation and prosecution of offending teachers. The country’s authorities initiated a campaign to implement a 2005 law that forbids forced child begging.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials promoted religious pluralism and tolerance through engagement with the country’s largest Sufi brotherhoods, the newly-arrived Papal Nuncio in Dakar, and an influential imam of a major mosque who honored the victims of the Orlando nightclub shooting during an iftar hosted by the Ambassador in Thies.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 13.9 million (July 2015 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.

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 Social Development 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 can 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

In October a French national was arrested in Dakar for “insulting” Islam and held in Dakar’s Rebeuss Prison. The accused reportedly threatened to kill his employer and disparaged Islam following a dispute. The employer filed a complaint, leading to the arrest for making death threats, defamation, and blasphemy. Following his arrest, the accused reportedly admitted to police that he maligned Islam, the Quran, and the Prophet Muhammad.

In June a court in Kolda convicted Islamic preacher Ibrahima Seye of glorifying terrorism, incitement to civil disobedience and religious intolerance, and sentenced him to one year in jail. Seye had praised jihad and referred to President Sall as an “infidel.” Some imams protested Seye’s arrest, but others accused him of making “misleading” sermons. The prosecutor stated his sentence was too light and filed an appeal. In October the Dakar Court of Appeals increased Seye’s sentence to 30 months (24 without parole).

In October the Court of Dakar delivered a suspended six-month sentence to Imam Cheikh Mbacke Sakho for insulting the country’s Mouride brotherhood, a Sufi order. In an online video from September, Sakho accused the Mouride leadership of making a “business” out of religion and “tricking” their followers, arguing they were not following the example of Mouride founder Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba. A lawyer representing the plaintiffs called the court’s decision “calamitous,” arguing the punishment should have been more severe and announcing they would appeal the sentence.

During a speech in July, President Sall invited Islamic scholars to deliver a “doctrinal response” (one based on the Quran and Islamic doctrine) to those who would use religion to justify acts of terrorism. Some scholars subsequently echoed his remarks, in particular the government-employed imam of Dakar’s Grand Mosque. During the United Nations General Assembly session in September, the president urged the international community not to blame Islam or Muslims for acts of terrorism: “We will not allow the crazed acts of a minority without faith or law to serve as a pretext to stigmatize more than a billion Muslims and their religion.” These remarks were echoed by some of Sall’s supporters.

The government provided direct financial and material assistance to religious groups, primarily to maintain or rehabilitate places of worship or to underwrite

special events. There was no formal procedure for applying for assistance. All religious groups had access to these funds and often competed on an ad hoc basis to obtain them. President Sall occasionally visited beneficiaries of these funds. In October he visited mosques the government was rehabilitating in Kaolack and Tambacounda.

The government encouraged and assisted Muslim participation in the Hajj, providing imams with hundreds of free airplane tickets for the pilgrimage for distribution among citizens. Of the 10,500 Senegalese participants in the Hajj, 1,500 were given assistance by the government while the rest traveled on their own via tour operators. The government provided assistance for an annual Roman Catholic pilgrimage to the Vatican, the Palestinian territories, and Israel. The Catholic Church reported the government provided 368 million CFA francs (\$589,000) for 550 Catholic pilgrims who traveled to the Vatican in August and September, an increase from 358 million CFA francs (\$573,000) for 338 pilgrims in 2015.

The government allowed up to four hours of voluntary religious education per week in public and private elementary schools. Parents could choose either a Christian or Muslim curriculum. Students had the option to opt out of the curriculum. The Ministry of Education reported slightly more than a million students participated in religious education through the public elementary school system.

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

The Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Women, Family and Social Development monitored the country's associations, including religious groups and NGOs affiliated with them, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs monitored foreign-based NGOs, including those affiliated with religious groups, to ensure they were operating within the terms of their registration. The ministries required the submission of an annual report, including a financial report, in an effort to track potential funding of terrorist groups. There were no reports that any organization has had its registration revoked for operating outside the terms of its registration.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

A coalition of children's rights NGOs highlighted abuses of students at some traditional Islamic religious schools known as *daaras*, where young children study the Quran and sometimes live. Some *daaras* reportedly forced the children to beg and local media and NGOs documented physical and sexual abuse of some *daara* students. The NGO coalition urged the government to implement more effective regulation of Quranic schools and to prosecute teachers who commit serious violations against children. In July authorities initiated a campaign to implement a 2005 law that forbids forced child begging.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The ambassador and other embassy officials met 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 campaign against forced child begging. The ambassador and U.S. officials engaged with religious leaders, including leaders of the main Islamic brotherhoods, religious groups, government, and civil society, to promote and help facilitate freedom of religion and societal respect for religious freedom. The ambassador met with a leader from one of the country's largest Sufi brotherhoods, and discussed efforts to promote religious tolerance. The ambassador also met with the newly arrived papal nuncio in Dakar to discuss religious tolerance and the treatment of the country's Catholic minority.

During Ramadan, the ambassador hosted an iftar in Thies during which he delivered remarks highlighting the importance of religious and ethnic diversity and harmony. During the event, the imam of a major mosque in the region honored the victims of the Orlando nightclub shooting, called for accepting diversity, and condemned religious-based violence. The event and the imam's remarks were favorably covered in print media.

The ambassador hosted a discussion and dinner at a shelter for street children in the northern city of Saint Louis on community-based methods to protect vulnerable children. During the event, the city's head imam as well as the archbishop of Saint Louis spoke about the need for the community to work together across religious lines to protect street children.