

# **GAMBIA 2017 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 January President Adama Barrow announced the country's return to a secular republic as prescribed in the constitution, overturning a decree by former President Yahya Jammeh proclaiming the country an Islamic state. On several occasions, President Barrow stressed the need for continued religious freedom and tolerance, and in February he appointed a special advisor to the president for religious and traditional affairs. The president called for continued religious tolerance between Christians and Muslims in the region on various occasions, such as during a meeting with the Archbishop Benjamin Ndiaye of Dakar in August. Barrow also linked religious freedom and tolerance to investor confidence. During official events and ceremonies, it was customary to begin with both Muslim and Christian prayers. In May Minister of Agriculture Omar Jallow spoke at the 41st Jalsa Salana (Annual Convention) of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at (community) and promised full government protection of the community.

Interfaith marriage remained common and accepted. There were continued tensions between the majority Sunni Muslim community and the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. The Supreme Islamic Council (SIC), a religious council tasked with providing Islamic religious guidance, continued to state that the Ahmadiyya community did not belong to Islam, and it did not include members of the community in its events and activities. Ahmadi Muslims stated they were part of Islam and thus should be fully integrated within the Muslim community. The government largely did not become involved in the disagreement between the two communities.

At the embassy's annual iftar in June, the Ambassador urged government officials and religious leaders to safeguard religious freedom and tolerance and to continue being open to different views and beliefs. The Ambassador encouraged Sunni and Ahmadi Muslims to practice restraint and tolerance and to allow one another to coexist in mutual respect and acceptance. Embassy officials met representatives of the Ahmadiyya community and the SIC on numerous occasions and expressed hope for continued peace and tolerance.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (July 2017 estimate). It is estimated that 95.7 percent of the population are Muslim, mostly Sunni. The Christian community makes up 4.2 percent of the population, the majority Roman Catholics. Religious groups that constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Ahmadi Muslims, Bahais, Hindus, and Eckankar members.

## 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 imposes the condition 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. The constitution 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. The court’s jurisdiction applies only to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance where the involved parties are Muslims.

There are no formal guidelines for registration of religious groups, but 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 all NGOs to 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 the activities of NGOs.

The law requires all public and private schools throughout the country to include basic Muslim or Christian instruction in their curricula. Students may not opt out

of these classes. The government provides religious education teachers to schools that cannot recruit such teachers.

The constitution bans political parties organized on a religious basis.

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

### **Government Practices**

In January President Barrow announced the country's return to a secular republic, as outlined in the constitution, overturning a decree by former President Jammeh that had proclaimed the country to be an Islamic state. In February President Barrow appointed a Special Advisor on Religious and Traditional Affairs, Dembo Bojang, who reassured Muslim leaders that the Barrow administration would not seek to interfere in religious affairs. President Barrow called for continued religious tolerance between Christians and Muslims in the West Africa region on various occasions, such as during a meeting with the Archbishop Ndiaye of Dakar in August. On several occasions, the president hosted religious leaders from both the Christian and Muslim communities at his official residence, and on each occasion, he reiterated the need for continued religious freedom and tolerance.

All principal religious groups stated they supported the Barrow administration's return to a secular republic. Ahmadi leaders privately praised the president's decision and indicated the state should stay out of religious affairs. SIC leaders also agreed with the return to a secular republic and indicated they had not supported former President Jammeh's proclamation of the country to be an Islamic state. President Barrow used various occasions to encourage religious freedom and tolerance and linked religious peace with economic advancement and better investment opportunities. In a meeting with the Christian community, he stated, "having Christians in my cabinet manifests our belief that we are all Gambians and we should nurture and celebrate the peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians." There were three Christians in the cabinet of 19 members.

In May Minister of Agriculture Omar Jallow spoke at the 41st Jalsa Salana (Annual Convention) of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at (community), declaring himself a life-long friend of the Ahmadiyya. He promised full government protection of the community.

### **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 insist that the Ahmadi Muslims did not belong to Islam. There were no reports of harassment, according to the observers and religious leaders. 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 rest of the Muslim community. The Ahmadis said they had invited the SIC to all of their public events, but SIC members never attended. SIC leaders said that they did not invite Ahmadis to their events.

In May the media reported that a group of Sunni Muslims prevented Ahmadi members from entering the local cemetery to bury an Ahmadi Muslim in Tallinding, a town in the Kanifing municipality. Ahmadi leaders characterized the incident as a misunderstanding and stated that they informed local police of their intent to proceed with the burial before entering the cemetery. They said they wanted the police to be aware in case someone objected to them entering a Muslim cemetery. The police in turn sought permission from their superiors before allowing the Ahmadi to proceed with the burial. After a period of time, the police finally received permission, and the burial proceeded without incident. While the local media reported this as a standoff between Sunni and Ahmadi Muslims that needed to be resolved with the assistance of the police forces, members of the Ahmadi community stated that no standoff took place.

There were no reports of tension or disagreements between Christians and Muslims during the year.

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 religious differences were reportedly generally tolerated and accepted among family members and neighbors.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

During Ramadan, the embassy held its annual iftar for government officials and religious leaders. During the event, the Ambassador urged those present to safeguard the virtues of religious tolerance and harmony and to continue being open to different views and beliefs. The Ambassador encouraged Sunni and Ahmadi Muslims to practice restraint and tolerance and to allow one another to coexist in mutual respect and acceptance.

Embassy officials met representatives of the Ahmadiyya community and the SIC on numerous occasions and expressed hope for continued peace and tolerance.