



## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Muslims : **88.8%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **5.3%**
- Christians : **4.5%**
- Others : **1.4%**

2.055.000

11.295 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

According to Article 1 of its constitution, the Gambia is a sovereign, secular republic.<sup>[1]</sup> Article 25 guarantees freedom of religion. The government has generally respected this provision. Religious communities are not required to register with the authorities. For Muslims, *Shari'a* law applies to marriages, divorces and inheritance matters. The national law provides for Islamic and Christian religious instruction in state and private schools; this is generally respected by the government.

The situation in the Gambia regarding religious freedom has improved significantly during the period under review. For example, in January 2017 the new President, Adama Barrow, reversed the decision by his predecessor, long-time dictator Yahya Jammeh, to make the Gambia an Islamic republic.<sup>[2]</sup> The constitution had declared the country to be a secular state but in December 2015 Jammeh renamed the Gambia an "Islamic Republic", making it the second such country in Africa after Mauritania.<sup>[3]</sup>

Initially, Jammeh issued no official statement detailing the specific effects of establishing an Islamic state. In any case, he lost popular support and, following the December 2016 presidential election, the country saw a peaceful transition of power. It was the first such peaceful democratic transfer of government since the Gambia gained its independence in 1965.

Following the elections, Jammeh – initially at least and to the surprise of all observers – admitted his electoral defeat and released some opposition figures.<sup>[4]</sup> However, on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2016 he publicly rejected the election result. He insisted on remaining in office and called for new elections. As a result, the Economic Community of West African States<sup>[5]</sup> with the backing of the UN Security Council, made a concerted effort to mediate and put pressure on Jammeh – initially in vain – to resign from office. It was only the threat of military intervention that convinced Jammeh to concede<sup>[6]</sup>

During his time in office, Jammeh had largely suppressed opposition political forces, an independent judiciary and media critical of the government. Time and again, the regime arranged for those it did not approve of to “disappear” and committed numerous human rights violations.

After his inauguration, Barrow stated that the country would once again be known as a “Republic”, removing the word “Islamic” instituted by Jammeh. He also pledged to promote good governance, the rule of law and democratic institutions, freedom of the press and the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He also announced a return to the Commonwealth community that the country had left in 2013. Barrow also overturned Jammeh’s decision to withdraw from the International Criminal Court (ICC). Barrow’s party, the United Democratic Party (UDP), scored a clear victory in the elections to the new parliament held in April 2017 – elections that were considered peaceful, free and fair.

## | Incidents

Inter-faith relations in this predominantly Islamic country have traditionally been good. Sufism, for instance – known for its tolerant attitude towards people of other faiths – has a strong position in the Gambia. It consists of brotherhoods – the Tijaniyya, the Qadiriya and the Muradiya, for example – that are known for their particular form of mysticism and their non-violent views.

The announcement, however, that the Gambia would be transformed into an Islamic Republic had caused great concern in civil society. Fears eased considerably after Adama Barrow became president and when he stated he was scrapping Jammeh’s Islamisation plans. The new government is reportedly concerned with opening up the Gambia to the international community and defending the country against extremist tendencies.<sup>[7]</sup>

Islamic organisations and the Catholic Church maintain good relations. In addition to the major Muslim festivals, the Christian feasts of Christmas, Good Friday and Easter are celebrated. Members of the Interfaith Group for Dialogue and Peace, which includes Muslims, Christians and Baha’is, meet regularly to discuss matters of importance to all of the religious communities in the Gambia, particularly interfaith coexistence.<sup>[8]</sup>

Marriages between Christians and Muslims are not uncommon in the Gambia. Occasionally, there are tensions within Muslim neighbourhoods if a resident intends to convert to Christianity. This usually happens in the context of marriage<sup>[9]</sup>

There were no serious violations of religious freedom during the reporting period.

## | Prospects for freedom of religion

Social stability is suffering as a result of growing migration. According to the United Nations, the Gambia is one of the poorest countries in the world.<sup>10</sup> The exodus of young people to Europe is particularly problematic. The new government is trying to counteract migration through legal and economic measures. Those who leave the country usually leave large gaps behind, not just in their own family but often in the broader community and their religious group as well. The money transferred from abroad is very important for many families, but it cannot outweigh the long-term absence of young family members.

## Endnotes / Sources

- [1] Constitution of the Republic of the Gambia, World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), [http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file\\_id=221242](http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=221242), (accessed 2nd April 2018).
- [2] Vasudevan Sridharan, 'Adama Barrow removes 'Islamic' from The Gambia's official name', International Business times UK, 30th January 2017, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/adama-barrow-removes-islamic-gambias-official-name-1603686>, (accessed on 11 February 2018); 'Munzinger Länder: Gambia', Munzinger Archiv 2018, <https://www.munzinger.de/search/start.jsp>, (accessed 30 March 2018).
- [3] Die Tagespost, 9th January 2016.
- [4] Munzinger Archiv 2018, op.cit.
- [5] Economic Community of West African States often referred to as ECOWAS.
- [6] 'Profile: Former Gambian President Yahya Jammeh', BBC, 22nd January 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-24383225>, (accessed 3rd April 2018).
- [7] Stephan Detjen, 'Ein Land im politischen Aufbruch', Deutschlandfunk, 15th December 2017, [http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/gambia-ein-land-im-politischen-aufbruch.1773.de.html?dram:article\\_id=406118](http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/gambia-ein-land-im-politischen-aufbruch.1773.de.html?dram:article_id=406118), (accessed 11th February 2018).
- [8] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Gambia', International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 2nd April 2018).
- [9] Ibid.