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CHRISTIANITY TODAY

Africa Has a New Islamic State. Or Does It?

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February 18, 2016

Today, the river nation of The Gambia is celebrating its 51st year of independence. The question is whether it is doing so as Africa's second official Islamic state.

"In line with the country's religious identity and values, I proclaim The Gambia as an Islamic state," President Yahya Jammeh declared in December. "Accepting Allah's religion as your religion and as your way of life is not negotiable."

Pakistan, Iran, and fellow African nation Mauritania also identify themselves as Islamic states.

Jammeh hastened to reassure the Christian minority that this did not jeopardize their freedom to practice their faith.

"Let me make it very clear: that does not mean Christians cannot worship in their way of life," he said. "Christians should be given their own respect; the way they celebrate Christmas or whatever will continue. In our relationship with all the rest of the religions, nobody has the right to interfere with their way of life."

There will be no dress requirements as a result of this status, the president said.

"I have not appointed anybody as an Islamic policeman," Jammeh said. "The way women dress is not your business; you are Muslim she is a Muslim; you should not tell her how she should dress, it is not your business, in the next world you cannot defend her."

But just weeks later, Jammeh issued an executive order banning all female civil employees from having their hair uncovered at work.

Female staff "are no longer allowed to expose their hair during official working hours" and should "use head tie and neatly wrap their hair," the memo said.

The directive lasted just over a week, and drew ire from opposition and pro-democracy groups.

"The decision is abandoned," Jammeh said in a statement to state radio, adding that women are his "best friends" and his "sisters" and that he was concerned for "their well-being in all circumstances."

"Consequently, this decision that makes them unhappy has been lifted," he said, saying that the ban had "nothing to do with religion."

Jammeh said the decision to declare the country an Islamic state was a response to the current reality in Gambia, a British colony until 1965.

"As Muslims are the majority in the country, Gambia cannot afford to continue the colonial legacy," he said.

Bounded by the overwhelmingly Muslim Senegal, Christians make up about 5 percent of Gambia's 1.7 million population. More than half of this group is Catholic, while Protestants make up 1.5 percent of the total population, according to 2010 datafrom the Pew Research Center's Global Religious Futures project.

Gambia's opposition leader objected to the announcement, arguing that Gambia is a secular state, and a change to that must be constitutionally confirmed.

"You cannot make such a declaration without going through a referendum," saidNational Reconciliation Party leader Hamat Bah.

Jammeh has been in power since his coup in 1994, and has a "deplorable human rights record and rampant corruption" which lost him Western support, said Human Rights Watch's Jeffrey Smith.

"As such, he is desperately attempting to foster a closer and more lucrative relationship with the Arab world," Smith told Al-Jazeera. "By couching his decision in terms of 'fighting colonialism,' we can see that he is trying to cozy up with other parts of the world that harbor anti-West sentiments."

The president's decision may divide the country, said former national soccer star and Christian Matthew Mendy.

"There are so many countries in Africa that have a Muslim majority, yet they are not Islamic states," wrote Mendy in an op-ed, naming Senegal, Mali, Somalia, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt as examples.

In Morocco, where Gambia's First Lady is from, more than 99 percent of the popular is Muslim, yet it isn't an Islamic state, he said.

"Having a majority should not validate claiming ownership of a whole," he said.

Gambia was not listed on Open Door's 2016 World Watch List but is described as a "religiously tolerant country" in its 2014 report on the world's hardest places to be a Christian.

"Not only is the constitution secular, the present government has so far defended its position on religious tolerance with unwavering commitment," Open Doors wrote. When one Islamist group

tried to veil girls at Roman Catholic schools and another beat up girls and women for not dressing to Islamic requirements, "the government came down hard on those involved," Open Doors said.

In November, Jammeh banned female genital mutilation because it was not commanded in the Qur'an.

"Yet, Islamic extremism as a persecution engine is present in the country," Open Doors said. "Non-violent measures are taken to Islamize the country, particularly the educational system/institutions, public institutions, media, and marriage/family."

In 2003, the Cato Institute identified Gambia as one of 46 countries that discriminates against non-Muslims because of its severe limits on free expression and assembly, penalties for apostasy and blasphemy, ban on advocating for secularism, and Islamic religious privilege.

In 2007, Philip Yancey wrote about Lamin Sanneh, a Gambian-born Yale historian and missiologist, and his take on colonialism's legacy.

Strangely enough, Sanneh points out, from the Muslim perspective "colonialism did more to aid Islam than all jihads put together." Queen Victoria's representatives in Africa saw local imams and muftis as a socially stabilizing force and built up their power, even to the extent of passing laws against conversion to Christianity.

CT previously interviewed Sanneh about his conversion, Muslim-Christian relations, Anglican troubles, and the future of Christianity. CT has also spoken with him about his book, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa*, a story of the freed slaves who brought Christ—and liberty—to West Africa.