

LIBERIA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the separation of religion and state and stipulates all persons are entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, except as required by law to protect public safety, order, health, morals, or the rights of others. It also provides for equal protection under the law and prohibits religious tests for office and the establishment of a state religion. Religious leaders urged the government to engage religious communities in proactive dialogue on social issues, rather than calling upon religious organizations as mediators only after problems developed. Muslim organizations said they welcomed the appointment of a Muslim religious advisor to the president and the granting of leave to Muslim civil servants for Eid al-Fitr, but they expressed continued concern about other policies and practices they said could engender resentment among the Muslim community. Human rights organizations continued to call upon the government to help prevent harmful traditional practices associated with indigenous beliefs, including ritualistic killings and trial by ordeal.

In June two boys were killed in suspected ritualistic killings, according to media. In September a jury convicted seven men and sentenced them to 45 years in prison for their roles in a December 2018 attack against three women accused of witchcraft.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials engaged with government officials, including the president's religious advisors, members of the legislature, and others, in support of efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and to stress U.S. government support of religious freedom and tolerance in connection with issues relating to historical accountability, land disputes, and ethnic tensions. The Ambassador and embassy officials promoted religious freedom and tolerance across government and society through outreach to religious leaders and communities. The embassy hosted an iftar with participants from different faith communities during Ramadan.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.9 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2008 National Population and Housing Census, the population is 85.6 percent Christian, 12.2 percent Muslim, 1.4 percent persons who claim no religion, 0.6 percent adherents of indigenous religious beliefs, and less than 1 percent members of other religious groups, including Baha'is, Hindus,

Sikhs, and Buddhists. Muslim organizations continued to dispute the official statistics, stating that Muslims constitute up to 20 percent of the population and calling for the government to conduct a new census. Christian churches include African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Baptist, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Episcopal, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, United Methodist, and a variety of Pentecostal churches. Many members of religious groups also incorporate elements of indigenous beliefs and customs into their religious practices.

Christians reside throughout the country. Muslims belonging to the Mandingo and Fula ethnic groups reside throughout the country, while Muslims of the Vai ethnic group live predominantly in the west. The Sande and Poro societies – often referred to as secret societies – combine traditional religious and cultural practices and are present in the northern, western, and central regions of the country. Other traditional cultural and religious societies, including the Kui Society and Bodio priests, exist in the southeast.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the separation of religion and state and stipulates all persons are entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It states no one shall be hindered in the exercise of these rights except as required by law to protect public safety, order, health, morals, or the rights of others. It provides for equal protection under the law and prohibits political parties that exclude citizens from membership based on religious affiliation. It also states no religious group should have exclusive privileges or preferences, and the country should establish no state religion.

The government requires all religious groups, except for indigenous ones that generally operate under customary law, to register their articles of incorporation and their organizations' statements of purpose.

Local religious organizations register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and pay a one-time fee of 10,500 Liberian dollars (\$56) to file their articles of incorporation and an annual fee of 3,500 Liberian dollars (\$19) for registration. Foreign religious organizations pay 84,000 Liberian dollars (\$450) for registration annually and a one-time fee of 105,000 Liberian dollars (\$560) to file their articles of

incorporation. Religious organizations also pay the Liberian Revenue Authority 1,000 to 2,000 Liberian dollars (\$5 to \$11) to notarize articles of incorporation to be filed with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and an additional 1,000 Liberian dollars (\$5) to receive a registered copy of the articles. The Ministry of Finance and Development Planning issues proof of accreditation for the articles of incorporation. There is also an option of completing the same process at the Liberia Business Registry. Some religious organizations reported being charged registration fees for each of their individual locations throughout the country.

Registered religious organizations, including missionary programs, religious charities, and religious groups, receive tax exemptions on income taxes and duty-free privileges on goods brought into the country, privileges not afforded unregistered groups. Registered groups may be sued as a single entity separately from any lawsuits brought against individual owners.

The law requires high-level government officials to take an oath ending with the phrase, “So help me God,” when assuming office. It is customary for Christians to kiss the Bible and Muslims the Quran on those occasions.

Public schools offer nonsectarian religious and moral education as part of the standard curriculum, which includes an overview and history of various religious traditions and an emphasis on moral values.

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

Government Practices

The government, through city ordinances, required businesses and markets, including those owned or operated by Muslims, to close on Sundays and Christmas Day for municipal street cleaning. Some Muslim business owners said they viewed the regular street cleaning as an excuse for the government to close all businesses in honor of the Christian Sabbath, and some Muslim organizations expressed worry that the practice could engender antigovernment resentment among Muslim citizens.

In March President George Weah appointed Usmane T. Jalloh as the country’s first official Muslim religious advisor, to serve alongside two Christian advisors and to advise the president on issues relating to the Muslim community. The government in June for the first time granted leave to Muslim civil servants to observe Eid al-Fitr. Muslim organizations said they welcomed the president’s appointment of a

Muslim religious advisor and the granting of paid leave. The organizations, however, continued to call for official recognition or observance of major Islamic religious holidays and cited Christmas and Fast and Prayer Day, which falls near Good Friday, as examples of officially recognized Christian holidays. Muslim organizations have requested to make Eid al-Fitr a national holiday since 1995. Members of the Muslim and Baha'i communities working in government or public positions said government agencies continued to be reluctant to grant time off to observe other religious holidays.

Christian and Muslim religious leaders participated in the annual July 26 Independence Day celebrations, including the opening benediction. President Weah visited a mosque and a church as part of the Independence Day celebrations.

Muslim community leaders issued a press release during Ramadan praising Inspector General of the Liberia National Police Patrick Sudue for “exceptional leadership in protecting lives and properties.”

Religious leaders recommended the government engage religious communities in proactive dialogue on social issues, rather than calling upon religious organizations as mediators only after problems develop. On a few occasions, the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL) called for and facilitated dialogue between the government and the organizers of high-profile protests.

According to Muslim religious leaders, the government employed a disproportionate number of Christian chaplains relative to Muslim chaplains to serve in government institutions when compared with the religious demographics of the country. The government reportedly employed only two Muslim chaplains – one in the armed forces and one in the Supreme Court. By comparison, each ministry reportedly had a Christian chaplain, while the Senate had five and the House of Representatives had two. Christian chaplains frequently read Christian prayers before starting official business.

The government continued to subsidize private schools, most of which were affiliated with Christian and Muslim organizations. The government provided subsidies based on need, through an application process. Muslim leaders continued to say the subsidies disproportionately favored Christian schools.

In July the legislature passed a new law on domestic violence that did not contain a prohibition on female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C), although earlier versions of the law had contained such language. Some observers said the

exclusion of FGM/C from the law was a capitulation to traditional secret societies, which combined religious and cultural practices and engaged in the practice as part of their indoctrination ceremonies. In June the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the National Traditional Council agreed to suspend Sande Society activities for one year to undertake a national inventory of locations where initiation rites, including FGM/C, are practiced. Human rights organizations said Sande activities continued across the country despite the announcement.

Human rights organizations called upon the government to intervene in and investigate cases of persons injured or killed due to accusations of witchcraft, exorcisms, and trials by ordeal.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Human rights organizations noted an increase over the past year in ritualistic killings and other violent practices within traditional secret societies.

In June two boys, ages 9 and 10, from Kingsville, Montserrado County, died in what media reported were ritual killings. The boys reportedly were abducted in May and their bodies found with body parts missing on June 3. Religious and community leaders condemned the killings and called on police and government officials to hold the perpetrators accountable. At year's end, no arrests had been made.

In September a jury in Buchanan convicted seven men and sentenced them to 45 years in prison on charges of murder, aggravated assault, criminal facilitation, and criminal conspiracy for their roles in a December 2018 attack against three women accused of witchcraft. After being accused of eating a child as part of a ritualistic practice, the women were stripped, paraded through town, beaten, assaulted with palm branches and nettles, and raped; one woman was killed.

Unlike in the previous year, the Liberian Muslim Women's Network reported no instances of workplace discrimination against women wearing headscarves and no incidents of discrimination during byelections.

A wide variety of Christian, Muslim, and interfaith organizations worked throughout the year to promote tolerance, dialogue, and conflict resolution through training sessions, workshops, and community meetings. The Liberian Council of Churches (LCC) and the National Muslim Council met and participated regularly in the IRCL, the country's foremost interfaith organization. The LCC and the

National Traditional Council participated in the government's September National Economic Dialogue, and the LLC held a number of workshops and outreach events with government agencies and international partners on social issues.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim and Baha'i communities previously applied to participate in the IRCL and expressed their desire to join, but at year's end were not admitted as members.

Some employers continued to excuse Muslims from employment or classes to attend Friday prayers, although there was no legal requirement to do so.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and embassy officials engaged with government officials, including the president's religious advisors, officials from the Ministry of Justice's human rights division, members of the legislature, and others, to stress the U.S. government's support of religious freedom and tolerance. During a Liberian Independence Day event in July, the Ambassador visited the Black Jinnah Mosque with President Weah and spoke about religious tolerance as a safeguard of a democratic society.

The embassy regularly met with a variety of civil society and religious figures, including representatives of a variety of Christian, Muslim, Baha'i, and traditional religious groups, to discuss tolerance and the importance of religious leaders and adherents working to bring communities together. The embassy hosted an iftar with participants from different faith communities during Ramadan, emphasizing religious tolerance, the importance of dialogue, and the role religious leaders play in bringing together disparate groups.

The embassy worked with religious leaders to emphasize peaceful reconciliation practices as the country continued to cope with the effects of its civil wars and build upon existing networks to engender greater trust between communities.