

# **MADAGASCAR 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religious thought and expression and prohibits religious discrimination in the workplace. Other laws protect individual religious freedom against abuses by government or private actors. The government required religious groups and institutions to register to gain legal status and to operate in the country, and restricted the rights of groups to worship or otherwise gather in public spaces. The government made no decision on reopening a religious radio station linked to the political opposition that the unelected previous regime had closed. The links between religion and politics at times made it difficult to categorize such restrictions as based solely on religious identity. The nationality code continued to result in non-citizenship status for many members of the Islamic community.

Leaders of the Muslim community and other religious groups engaged in dialogue.

U.S. embassy officials engaged regularly with the government and with civil society on issues affecting religious freedom, including the reopening of a Methodist radio station and the negative impact of the nationality code on many Muslims with long-standing ties to the country.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 23.2 million, of which 52 percent adhere to indigenous beliefs, 41 percent is Christian, and 7 percent Muslim (July 2014 estimate).

Although they indicated precise figures were not available, local religious groups reported nearly half of the population is Christian. The four principal Christian groups are Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Presbyterians (the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar – FJKM). Smaller groups include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and local evangelical denominations.

Christian groups report the most numerous among non-Christian groups are adherents of indigenous religions. In addition, many people hold a combination of indigenous and Christian or Muslim beliefs.

## MADAGASCAR

Local academics estimate Muslims constitute approximately 15 percent of the population. According to Muslim leaders, the Islamic community is largely concentrated in the north and northwest. Citizens of ethnic Indian and Pakistani descent and Comorian immigrants represent the majority of Muslims.

There are small numbers of Hindus and Jews across the country.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of religious thought and expression and prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation in the workplace. The law protects individual religious freedom against abuses by governmental or private actors. The labor code prohibits religious discrimination within labor unions and professional associations.

The law requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Interior, although the government does not always enforce these provisions. By registering with the government, a religious group receives the legal status necessary to receive direct bequests and other donations. Religious associations must apply for a tax exemption each time they receive a donation from abroad. Registered religious groups also have the right to acquire land from individuals to build places of worship. To qualify for registration, a group must have at least 100 members and an elected administrative council of no more than nine members, all of whom must be citizens.

Groups failing to meet these registration requirements may instead register as “simple associations.” Simple associations may not receive donations or hold religious services, but the law does allow them to conduct various types of community and social projects. Groups engaging in additional activities would be subject to legal action. If a group has foreign leadership and/or members, it may form an association “reputed to be foreign.” An association is reputed foreign only if the leader or members of the board include foreign nationals. The law does not prohibit national associations from having foreign nationals as simple members. Such foreign associations may only receive temporary authorizations, subject to periodic renewal and other conditions.

## MADAGASCAR

### Government Practices

The Ministry of Interior registered 60 new religious groups during the year, bringing the total to approximately 220 officially registered groups. During the year, the Ministry of Interior approved all requests received and, in some cases, it allowed associations to start operating before officially approving their request.

The government required a permit for all public demonstrations, including religious events such as outdoor worship services. Contrary to previous years, there were no reports that the government denied any religious groups these permits, including the FJKM, which had reported such denials in the past.

Opposition radio stations that the former de facto regime had closed remained off the air. This included FJKM-sponsored Radio Fahazavana, despite legal actions by the FJKM to reopen it. The Ministry of Communications catalogued radio stations that the de facto regime had closed. By year's end, however, the new government had not issued a decision on allowing any opposition stations, including Radio Fahazavana, to reopen. Because of linkages between that station and the political opposition, it was difficult to classify the state's inaction in reopening the station as an instance of religious intolerance.

Some members of the Muslim community noted a general improvement in their ability to worship. Muslim leaders attributed the improvements in part to increased representation in government (which included two ministers, six members of the national assembly, and at least one ministerial chief of staff who were Muslim) following the 2013 democratic elections. The Muslim community built several new mosques and, contrary to previous years, community leaders reported local authorities demonstrated greater willingness to issue official documents with Arabic-sounding names. According to several civil society groups, however, obtaining official documentation occasionally remained a problem for Muslims.

Due to their particular settlement history and mixed marriages over time, Muslims remained negatively affected by the country's nationality code, which restricted children born of Malagasy mothers and foreign national fathers from obtaining citizenship. While there were no official figures on statelessness, a study by NGO Focus Development and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which sampled residents in largely Muslim communities, estimated that approximately 6 percent of individuals in the communities surveyed were stateless. Of this number, more than 85 percent were born in the country.

## MADAGASCAR

Decisions by local authorities occasionally impeded the ability of some religious groups to practice their faith. For example, in one town, the chief of district decreed that Friday, Saturday, and Sunday were market days, making it financially prohibitive for both Christian and Muslim vendors to attend their respective religious services. Religious leaders also stated that inadequate government enforcement of labor laws resulted in some employers requiring their employees to work during religious services.

State-run Malagasy National Television continued to provide free broadcasting to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and to Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Presbyterians on weekends, along with the Muslim community once a week. During Ramadan, the Muslim community was able to purchase additional airtime.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of specific instances of societal discrimination against the Muslim community. Leaders of the Muslim community and other religious groups engaged in dialogue.

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

U.S. embassy officials engaged regularly with the new democratically elected government and with civil society on issues affecting religious freedom. In particular, the embassy publicly advocated for the reopening of the FJKM radio station. U.S. officials also met with FJKM leaders and discussed their concerns regarding this issue. Embassy officials also discussed the nationality code with local officials, other members of the diplomatic community, and local representatives of the United Nations focused on human rights. On November 28, the embassy organized a workshop with civil society on statelessness and revisions to the nationality code.