

LIBERIA 2017 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, or morals, or the rights of others. It also provides for equal protection under the law. A campaign to pass a constitutional amendment that would make the country a “Christian nation” continued to divide religious communities, and Muslim communities continued to call for making Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha national holidays. The leader of the opposition United People’s Party (UPP) in May said the country should become a Christian state, and he criticized Christian leaders for allowing a Muslim to head the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL), a position that normally rotates between Christian and Muslim leaders. In October after President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf met with a foreign Muslim cleric with views many considered controversial, her office released a statement emphasizing the country’s policy of religious equality and of nondiscrimination. According to the National Muslim Council of Liberia (NMCL), political parties were prejudiced against the selection of Muslim candidates as potential vice presidential picks due to fear that, upon the death of the president, a Muslim could become president.

In September Musah Ballot, deputy spokesperson of the National Imam Council of Liberia (NICL), implored Muslims to avoid voting for candidates deemed “anti-Islamic.” UNICEF reported concern over the number of cases of children accused of witchcraft and/or demonic possession.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives encouraged government officials to continue to promote religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy organized outreach to young religious leaders, including a discussion on religious tolerance in the 2017 general elections.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.6 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2008 National Population and Housing Census, the population is 85.6 percent Christian, 12.2 percent Muslim, 0.6 percent adherents of indigenous religious beliefs, 1.4 percent persons who claim no religion, and less than 1 percent members of other religious groups, including Bahais, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists. Unofficial reports and surveys estimate Muslims constitute up to

20 percent of the population. Many members of religious groups incorporate elements of indigenous beliefs into their religious practices. Christian groups include United Methodists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), AME Zion, and a variety of Pentecostal churches.

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. Traditional practitioners include the secret Sande and Poro societies, seen both as religious and cultural practitioners and highly influential in the northern, western, and central regions of the country. Other secret cultural or religious societies exist in the southeastern counties, including the Kui Society and Bodio priests.

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, or morals, or the rights of others. It also provides for equal protection under the law and prohibits political parties that exclude citizens from membership based on religious affiliation.

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 (MFA) and pay a one-time fee of 6,900 Liberian dollars (LD) (\$55) to file their articles of incorporation and an annual fee of 3,600 LD (\$29) for registration and a registration certificate. Foreign religious organizations pay 50,100 LD (\$400) for registration annually and a one-time fee of 62,600 LD (\$500) to file their articles of incorporation. Religious organizations also pay 1,000 to 2,000 LD (\$8 to \$16) to the Liberia Revenue Authority for notarization of articles of incorporation to be filed with the MFA and an additional 1,000 LD (\$8) 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, where each of the other offices has representation.

Registered religious organizations, including missionary programs, religious charities, and religious groups, receive tax exemption on income taxes and duty-free privileges on goods brought into the country, privileges not afforded unregistered groups. Registered groups may also appear in court as a single entity.

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

Public schools offer nonsectarian religious and moral education as an elective in all grades.

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

Government Practices

Some religious groups continued to pursue a constitutional amendment declaring the country a “Christian nation,” an effort begun in 2015. President Sirleaf, along with Catholic, Episcopal, Baptist, Lutheran, and Muslim communities, continued to oppose the initiative, while some evangelical Christian pastors, political parties and leaders, and members of the national legislature supported it. Muslim organizations, including the NMCL and NICL, continued to express concern about what they said was the implied prejudice of the proposal. They also expressed concern over the refusal of government to recognize major Muslim religious holidays while major Christian holidays were public holidays, as well as the imbalance of religious group representation in government roles. For example, the president has an official (Christian) religious advisor working for her as part of her staff, while other religions are not officially represented. The NICL stated it was concerned that some political parties called for making the country a “Christian nation” during election campaign-related events and interviews. In May the leader of the UPP told a group of Christian leaders in Ganta, Nimba County, that he would make Liberia a Christian state if elected. He also criticized the IRCL for having a Muslim leader, calling him unrepresentative of the country, particularly in international forums where he said it was unacceptable to have a Muslim representing the interests of Christians. The IRCL chair rotates every three years between a Muslim and a Christian as directed by the founding charter. According to the NMCL, political parties were also prejudiced against the selection of Muslim

candidates as potential vice presidential picks due to fear that, upon the death of the president, a Muslim would become president.

The Liberia Muslim Women Network (LMW-NET) and NICL reported National Elections Commission workers refused to allow some Muslim women to register to vote because the women refused to remove their hijabs for voter ID photographs. LMW-NET representatives said that women were forced to choose between registration and going against their religious beliefs and reported that women offered to uncover their ears for the photograph, but NEC workers rejected the proposed compromise. LMW-NET members stated women wearing traditional head wraps and Catholic nuns were allowed to wear head coverings in their voter ID photographs.

In April Imam Ali Krayee of the NICL called on the government to make Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha national holidays. Imam Krayee said the country “no longer has the luxury of time” to give Muslims their full rights “like their Christian brothers and sisters.” The request to make Eid al-Fitr a national holiday has been pending since 1995.

Although enforcement of the registration requirement was lax, according to religious groups, most religious groups registered, since unregistered groups risked being shut down by the government and did not qualify for tax-free status.

The government, through city ordinances and presidential proclamations, required businesses and markets, including Muslim-owned or -operated businesses and shops, to remain closed on Sundays for municipal street cleaning and on Christmas, a national holiday. Muslim-owned businesses stated they viewed the regular Sunday street cleaning as an excuse for the government to force their businesses to close to honor the Christian Sabbath. According to both the NICL and NMCL, the ordinances and proclamations were a violation of the constitution and a threat to the peace. The NMCL reported that it brought action in court seeking redress for the forced closures (which remained unresolved). Since penalties – consisting of fines of up to 200 LD (\$2) – were not strictly enforced, some Muslim-owned or -operated shops opened for limited hours on Sundays. Both the NICL and NMCL continued to say they would not have a problem with the closing of Muslim-owned businesses on Christmas if the end of Ramadan was also observed as a national holiday.

Government ceremonies commonly included opening and closing prayers. The prayers were usually Christian but occasionally were both Christian and Muslim.

In Lofa County, where a large number of Muslims reside, opening and closing prayers were alternately Christian and Muslim. The NICL, NMCL, and IRCL noted that government health facilities increasingly observed a period for Christian prayer at the start of workday.

Muslim groups, including the NICL, were concerned that more Christian chaplains than Muslim imams were appointed to serve in a religious capacity in government institutions and that the government paid more pastors than imams to teach religious education in public schools. The government subsidized private schools, most of which were affiliated with either Christian or Muslim organizations, and subsidies were provided proportionally based on the number of students. Muslim leaders complained that the academic calendar developed by the Ministry of Education favored Christians, as schools were closed for Christmas and Easter (which fell during spring break), but were not closed for the Muslim holidays of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. As a result, Muslim children were likely to miss class time and exams.

In October after the president met with a foreign Muslim cleric, whose views many considered controversial, her office released a statement emphasizing the country's policy of equality for all and of nondiscrimination.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In September Musah Ballot, NICL deputy spokesperson, implored Muslims to avoid voting for candidates deemed "anti-Islamic." Although he did not specify which candidates fell into the category, he said Muslims knew to whom he was referring. Some Christian leaders stated they found the statements divisive, while other Muslim leaders said politics and religion should remain completely separate.

During the year, followers of a traditional society destroyed the roof of a local mosque in Careysburg, Montserrado County, after a Muslim man refused to leave the area where they were holding traditional activities. The man was not a member of the traditional society. A local politician and an area businessperson paid for the repair of the damaged roof of the mosque, and the situation was resolved.

A UNICEF representative stated the organization continued to have concern about the number of cases of children accused of witchcraft and/or demonic possession. UNICEF and the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection conducted awareness raising campaigns and worked to reunite children accused of witchcraft with their parents and guardians in River Gee, Grand Gedeh, and Maryland

counties. As a result of the campaign, the ministry reported the number of children living in “prayer camps” was reduced to approximately 68 in the three counties, while the number of prayer camps decreased from five to three. Ministry social workers also conducted follow-up visits to ensure the wellbeing of children removed from the prayer camps. The United Nations labeled certain religious practices harmful, including trial by ordeal, cleansing or exorcism rituals, and forced initiation into secret societies through kidnapping.

Sporadic local quarrels between religious and traditional groups occurred in remote parts of the country, but because religion and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. In April religious and traditional society leaders held a conference on reconciliation and conflict prevention between residents of Nimba and Grand Gedeh counties. Religious and traditional leaders organized the community-based initiative with the assistance of state security officers, including the Liberia National Police.

The LMW-NET reported that a hospital forced a nurse to leave her position because she wore a hijab. The organization also reported women who attended a local vocational skills training school were dissuaded from pursuing teaching careers because they were required to remove the hijab to be hired as teachers.

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

In response to the continued campaign to declare the country a “Christian nation” and to preempt possible religious tensions during the national elections in October, the U.S. Ambassador and embassy staff engaged with government officials, including 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. The embassy encouraged peaceful dialogue from all parties.

The embassy also met with a variety of civil society and religious figures, including representatives of a variety of Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious groups. In discussions with religious leaders, the Ambassador emphasized the separation of state and religion in both the U.S. and Liberian constitutions. The embassy also worked with religious leaders to emphasize

peaceful reconciliation practices and build upon existing networks to de-escalate any religious tensions brought about by the legislative and presidential elections. During Ramadan, embassy outreach to two Muslim communities in Kakata and Clara Town included delivery of President Trump's and Secretary Tillerson's Ramadan messages and a discussion about tolerance and cooperation among religious groups to preserve peace. Embassy officials also held a roundtable with predominantly Muslim religious youth leaders to discuss peace, tolerance, and the importance of working together to build bridges between persons of different backgrounds and improve the lives of those around them. During the year, embassy personnel held several events and met with Christian and Muslim religious leaders to discuss tolerance and the importance of religious leaders and adherents working to bring communities together.