

LIBERIA 2016 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” engendered nationwide discussion and a split in a major religious confederation. In January local media reported that a group of Muslim youths protested the demolition of a mosque in Ganta, Nimba County. The mosque, according to news sources, was among buildings demolished by local authorities to enable road reconstruction. Some members of the Muslim community stated county authorities targeted Muslims and did not consult them before destroying the mosque. The government deployed national police to the site of the protest, which ended peacefully. The National Council of Imams reported it was aware of the incident, but did not consider it serious enough to warrant follow-up actions or discussions. The government continued to discourage traditional and religious burial rites to contain the spread of Ebola.

UNICEF reported some prayer camps in the country did not allow members to leave until they paid an undisclosed fee to the preacher. The UN agency also labeled certain religious practices involving children harmful, including trial by ordeal, cleansing or exorcism rituals, and forced initiation into secret societies through kidnapping. There were sporadic, localized quarrels between religious and traditional groups, but because ethnicity and religion were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize such incidents as solely based on religious identity.

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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.3 million (July 2016 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. The Muslim percentage of the population is a source of contention, as 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 on the basis of religious affiliation.

The government encourages all religious groups, except for indigenous ones who 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 approximately 5,000 Liberian dollars (\$55) to file their articles of incorporation, and an annual fee of 3,500 Liberian dollars (\$38) for registration and to receive a registration certificate. Foreign religious organizations are charged \$400 (36,400 Liberian dollars) for registration annually, and a one-time fee of \$500 (45,500 Liberian dollars) to file their articles of incorporation. Religious organizations also pay 1,000 to 2,000 Liberian dollars (\$11 to \$22) to the Liberia Revenue Authority

for notary services for articles of incorporation to be filed with the MFA and an additional 1,000 Liberian dollars (\$11) to receive a registered copy of the articles. An accreditation of the articles of incorporation is awarded at the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning.

Registered religious organizations, including missionary programs, religious charities, and religious groups, receive tax exemption and duty-free privileges benefits 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 that developed in 2015 at the Constitutional Review Conference where a majority of delegates endorsed the proposition, known as Proposition 24. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, along with Catholic, Episcopal, Baptist, Lutheran, and Muslim communities, all opposed the initiative, while some evangelical Christian pastors and members of the national legislature supported it.

In March the National Muslim Council of Liberia (NMCL) briefly suspended its membership within the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL), a council established to assist post-war Liberia engender religious tolerance. According to the NMCL, the suspension was in response to a campaign by the Liberia Council of Churches (LCC) to pass Proposition 24, which the NMCL said would prejudice other religious groups. The LCC had not publicly voiced opposition to the constitutional amendment until May when it officially rejected Proposition 24. This action reduced tensions, according to Muslim leaders, and subsequently the NMCL restored its membership in the IRCL. The LCC rejection of Proposition 24 splintered the group, and one part launched the National Christian Council of Liberia (NCCL) in July. The NCCL continued to advocate for a countrywide vote

on Proposition 24 and for its passage. The NMCL stated the events surrounding Proposition 24 ignited an unfortunate stalemate between Muslim and Christian leaders and threatened to endanger the IRCL. While thus far blocked by the president, the vote on the constitutional amendment remained pending at year end. In January local media reported that a group of Muslim youths protested the demolition of a mosque in Ganta, Nimba County. The mosque, according to news sources, was among buildings demolished by local authorities to enable road reconstruction, but some members of the Muslim community stated county authorities targeted Muslims and did not consult them before destroying the mosque. The government deployed national police to the site of the protest, which ended peacefully. The National Council of Imams stated it was aware of the incident, but did not consider it serious enough to warrant follow-up actions or discussions.

In July Sheikh Abubakar Sumaworo, Mufti of the NMCL, called on members of the legislature, diplomatic missions, and international partners to pressure the government to declare Eid al-Fitr a national holiday. The request to make Eid al-Fitr a national holiday has been pending since 1995. In August Senator Prince Johnson submitted a bill to the legislature that would have made Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha national holidays. Johnson said the bill would enhance harmony among tribal and religious groups, including Muslims. In September Representative Edwin Snowe submitted a similar bill, proposing to make Eid al-Adha a national holiday, which remained pending at year end.

In response to the Ebola epidemic in 2015, the government continued to discourage traditional and religious burial rites that could potentially increase the number of infections.

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 in accordance with the law. Muslim-owned businesses stated they viewed the regular Sunday municipal street cleaning as an excuse for the government to force their businesses to close to honor the Christian Sabbath. According to both the National Imam Council of Liberia (NICL) and the 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. Since penalties – consisting of fines of up to 200 Liberian dollars (\$2.27) – were not strictly enforced, some Muslim-owned or -operated shops opened for limited hours on Sundays. Both NICL and NMCL said 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 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.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In a December 2015 report UNICEF expressed concern over “prayer camps” in the country. Children were reportedly given to a local preacher after their parents were told the children had been inducted into witchcraft, were possessed, and that their ailments/problems could be solved through prayer. According to UNICEF and the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection (MGCSP), those inside the prayer camps were not allowed to leave until they paid an undisclosed fee to the preacher. The MGCSP and UNICEF worked to reunite more than 300 children with their parents and guardians in River Gee County. Under MGCSP regulations, “institutions” for children cannot be responsible for more than 28 children. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, however, which has jurisdiction over all traditional religious groups, gave the prayer camp in question a certificate to operate and did not intervene in the case.

UNICEF also stated concern for the increasing number of cases of children being accused of witchcraft and/or demonic possession. The UN labeled certain religious practices harmful, including trial by ordeal, cleansing or exorcism rituals, and forced initiation into secret societies through kidnapping.

Sporadic, localized 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. Religious and tribal leaders mediated such incidents and regularly had the support of the National Police.

According to the IRCL, in Lofa County Christians of the Lorma ethnic group predominantly patronized Christian-owned businesses, while local Muslims predominantly patronized Muslim-owned businesses.

According to St. John York, the consultant for Global Inter-faith relations building at the IRCL and former Secretary General of the IRCL, religious tensions were not always localized, and there was a tendency within the IRCL for Christians and Muslims to form opposing blocs on major issues of conflict, despite the organization's stated purpose of increasing religious dialogue in support of conflict resolution.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In response to the campaign to declare the country a "Christian nation," 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 also met with a variety of civil society and religious figures.

During Ramadan the Ambassador delivered greetings from President Obama on an Islamic radio station that underscored the U.S. commitment to religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador met with NCCL representatives to discuss Proposition 24. The Ambassador emphasized the separation of state and religion in both the U.S. and Liberian constitutions. Embassy officials also met with Christian and Muslim religious leaders to discuss tolerance and the importance of religion bringing communities together.