

LIBERIA 2020 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 as a last resort after problems develop. Religious leaders continued to express willingness to mediate in conflict situations as an extension of their proactive dialogue on social issues. In March, following consultation with the Liberian Council of Churches (LCC), the Minister of Health closed churches and mosques along with schools and businesses in two counties under a national health emergency as part of the country's COVID-19 response. In April, the President expanded the closures nationwide after declaring a three-week renewable national state of emergency. Some Christian religious groups initially resisted the closure. Police were called in to enforce the order to close houses of worship and arrested some Christian worshippers before the closure measures were later eased in May. Muslim groups continued to call on the legislature to pass a law recognizing Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as national holidays.

In February, police in Kakata, Margibi County, arrested and charged a Christian “prayer woman,” Yamah Yango, with manslaughter for allegedly beating to death her eight-year-old nephew, Tom Yango, following his refusal to continue with three days of fasting and prayer “to cleanse him of evil spirits.” At the request of local residents, in August, in Picnicess District of Grand Kru County, County Superintendent Doris N. Ylatun invited traditional herbalist Tamba Bundoo to “cleanse” Chenakaleh of witchcraft believed to have caused the death or disappearance of approximately 50 individuals over two years. His activities were halted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in early September following complaints. More than a hundred local citizens then staged a peaceful demonstration on September 3 seeking the resumption of Bundoo's activities by marching to the administration building in Barclayville to present their petition to the local authority of Grand Kru County.

U.S. embassy officials engaged with government officials, including the President's religious advisors and members of the legislature, 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. Embassy officials additionally promoted religious freedom and tolerance across society through outreach to religious leaders and communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.1 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2008 National Population and Housing Census, which remains the most recent available, the population is 85.6 percent Christian, 12.2 percent Muslim, 1.5 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 these official statistics, stating that Muslims constitute up to 20 percent of the population and calling for the government to conduct a new census, which is expected to take place in 2021.

Christian churches include the 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 Poro (for males) and Sande (for females) 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 the Bodio, or priests of the Gleebo people, 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 that 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 (\$64) to file their articles of incorporation and an annual fee of 3,500 Liberian dollars (\$21) for registration. Foreign religious organizations pay 84,000 Liberian dollars (\$520) for registration annually and a one-time fee of 105,000 Liberian dollars (\$640) to file their articles of incorporation. Religious organizations also pay 1,800 to 2,700 Liberian dollars (\$11-\$17) to notarize articles of incorporation to be filed with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and an additional 1,000 Liberian dollars (\$6) 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 report being charged registration fees for each of their individual locations throughout the country, as per a government regulation issued two years ago.

Registered religious organizations, including missionary programs, religious charities, and religious groups, receive income tax exemptions and duty-free privileges on goods brought into the country, privileges not afforded to 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

In March, Minister of Health Wilhelmina S. Jallah declared a national health emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic and designated as infected areas two of the country's 15 counties, Montserrado (where the capital Monrovia is located) and Margibi. She then imposed a lockdown that closed places of worship as well as schools and businesses. The government allowed places of worship to reopen on May 15. The Muslim and the small Baha'i communities generally adhered to the government's closure of places of worship, but according to the head of the LCC, some Christian religious groups resisted the measure. The Baha'i Spiritual Assembly, in keeping with the ban, suspended its New Year's celebration, which was scheduled for March 19 and 20, and the National Muslim Council suspended all religious activities at mosques. The LCC, however, noted that during negotiations with the government before the lockdown, there was agreement that churches or other places of worship would not have to close but would only reduce overcrowding and observe other rules related to social distancing. Places of worship were ultimately required to close, but sources stated that the determination initially came as a surprise to the LCC, as negotiations before the closure were mainly about overcrowding.

On March 22, according to media reports, police inspector general Colonel Patrick Toe Sudue and several police officers raided the church of Senator Prince Yormie Johnson, pastor of the Chapel of Faith Ministries and an accused war criminal. They entered during a service and attempted to enforce the government's COVID-19 restrictions and convince worshippers to leave. Johnson refused to halt the service, stating that the legislature remained open while houses of worship were being forced to close. Police threatened to arrest him if he held services the following week. The senator ended his March 22 church service early and did not hold a service the next week.

On March 26, a large group of worshippers of the Saint Assembly Church in the Old Road community in Monrovia gathered on a field and clustered together to worship and "pray for the nation." According to media reports, members of the group refused to obey police, who used loudspeakers to tell the group to disperse. The police arrested some members but did not succeed in dispersing those assembled. It was reported that Saint Assembly worshippers also ignored a team from the LCC dispatched to the field to assist police with dispersing them. The worshippers eventually left, and the next morning, police took control of the field in which the church members had gathered.

In March 2019, 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. On October 28, Jalloh stated that his office had worked out all the necessary modalities with the President's office for the two religions to live together in harmony. For example, he pointed out that the government had agreed that for official programs, if the opening prayer is delivered by Christian, then a Muslim will perform the closing prayer. In June 2019, the government, 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 advocated for recognition of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as national holidays since 1995. On May 24, at the end of Eid al-Fitr, Sheik Ali Krayee, Chief Imam of the Republic of Liberia and the head of the National Imam Council of Liberia (NICOL), called for legislation making Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha public holidays for Muslims a "social right." The Chief Imam said Muslims should not support political candidates who did not support the legislation and promised that the Muslim community in the country would mount pressure for an Islamic holiday after the upcoming special senatorial election.

In response to Muslim demands for the legislature to enact into law the two holidays, the Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Liberia, Jensen Seyenkulo, quoted in the *Liberian Observer* newspaper on May 27, stated that Christmas and Easter are celebrated worldwide and are not legislated in the country. He said that Fast and Prayer Day cut across every religion in the country and was not restricted to one religion and therefore was not a Christian holiday.

On August 4, dozens of Muslims, under the banner "Movement for Islamic Holidays in Liberia," also petitioned the legislature to recognize Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as national holidays. According to spokesperson Ayoubah Dauda Swaray, the group was composed of 20 Islamic organizations, mostly youth driven, with members mainly from Montserrado and Margibi Counties. Swaray noted that the group had the endorsement of the National Muslim Council of Liberia and the National Imam Council of Liberia. According to Swaray, the petition stated that several Christian holidays are celebrated as national holidays, but there are no

recognized Muslim holidays. According to Swaray, this lack of recognition marginalized the Muslim community. In receiving the petition, the chairman of the House Committee on Claims and Petition, Representative Rustonlyn Suacoco Dennis, thanked the group for its peaceful assembly and assured them of legislators' commitment to look through the matter and promised to present their request to the plenary for possible action. She also stated that, because the country is a secular state and there have been no religious holidays passed into law, the legislature would have to consider the request diligently before making any decision.

Members of the Muslim and Baha'í communities working in government or public positions said government agencies continued to be reluctant to grant time off to observe other religions' holidays.

Religious leaders recommended the government engage religious communities in proactive dialogue on social and other issues, such as COVID-19 awareness, political violence and disputes, and economic development, rather than calling upon religious organizations as mediators only after problems develop. On several occasions, as in the previous year, the Interreligious Council of Liberia (IRCL) called for and facilitated dialogue between the government and some opposition figures.

On July 30, when opposition Collaborating Political Parties (CPP) leader Alexander Cummings and Representative Yekeh Kolubah were attacked by an angry mob in Grand Gedeh County for their criticisms of the Weah presidency, LCC Secretary General Christopher Toe said the LCC wanted to be a part of the mediating team but was hampered by financial and logistical considerations. As a result, the LCC called for financial support from the government and partners.

The LCC held discussions with authorities of the University of Liberia and representatives of student groups from the university and from the African Methodist Episcopal University, who staged a protest on August 17 against a mandatory eLearning platform for instruction launched by the universities due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The students wanted the platform to be made optional. They threatened mass protests and demanded the reopening of the university campuses in order to return to a more traditional style of learning. On September 15, the University of Liberia dean of student affairs announced that the state-run university would resume normal learning activities once the necessary health protocols prescribed by the Commission on Higher Education were met at the university. Following the LCC intervention, the students accepted this outcome.

On May 14, the LCC, together with National Muslim Council of Liberia and the Traditional Council of Liberia, mediated a conflict between the Council of Patriots, a prodemocracy movement, and the Liberia Business Registry. The dispute centered on the refusal of the latter to grant the Council of Patriots' legal registration status due to what many members of the public saw as pressure from the government.

According to Muslim religious leaders, the government continued to employ a disproportionate number of Christian chaplains relative to Muslim chaplains 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. In contrast, each of the 19 ministries 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 to schools based on need through an application process, although Muslim leaders continued to say the subsidies disproportionately favored Christian schools.

Human rights organizations continued to call upon the government to intervene in and investigate cases of persons who were 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 course of several years in harmful traditional practices, including accusations of witchcraft, ritualistic killings, and other violent practices, including female genital mutilation, within traditional secret societies such as the Sande Society for girls.

In February, police in Kakata, Margibi County, arrested and charged a Christian "prayer woman," identified as Yamah Yango, with manslaughter for allegedly beating to death her eight-year-old nephew, Tom Yango. The incident occurred in the Madena community after the child reportedly refused to continue a three-day period of fasting and prayer imposed by his aunt as part of a ritual to "cleanse him

of evil spirits.” Yango was being held at the Kakata Central Prison while awaiting trial at the judiciary circuit court in Margibi County.

In July, according to local media, residents of Chenakaleh in the Picniness District of Grand Kru County asked local officials to employ a traditional herbalist to “cleanse” the area of witchcraft. The residents reportedly said that at least 50 individuals who had disappeared over approximately two years had been abducted for “ritualist purposes,” including a Catholic brother from the Picniness District, Joseph Nyenplue, who disappeared in June on a fishing trip. In August, Grand Kru County superintendent Doris N. Ylatun invited traditional herbalist Tamba Bundoo to “cleanse” Chenakaleh of “witchcraft and wizardry activities,” but the Ministry of Internal Affairs halted Bundoo’s activities in early September due to complaints of “primitive justice” being administered. On September 3, hundreds of citizens demonstrated to urge the resumption of Bundoo’s activities.

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 LCC and the National Muslim Council met and participated in the IRCL, the country’s foremost interfaith organization. In addition, the LCC held several workshops and outreach events on social issues with government agencies and international partners. For example, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, in July, the LCC held a meeting with the head of the COVID-19 Household Food Support Program to review the performance of food distribution. In October, the LCC organized a consultative meeting with political parties, the National Elections Commission, and other stakeholders to address what the LCC described as strengthening peace, security, and democracy in Liberia.

In July, the LCC hosted a consultation with the leadership of the COVID-19 Household Food Support Program (COHFSP), led by the Minister of Commerce and the World Food Program, to review the performance of the government-initiated food distribution program. Following the consultation, the subcommittee on food distribution of COHFSP held a working meeting with the LCC and proposed steps to ensure the peaceful distribution of emergency food relief assistance to vulnerable citizens and residents combating the pandemic.

In October, the LCC held consultations with the leadership of the country’s largest opposition political bloc, the CPP, on a planned nationwide protest action for electoral reform involving cleaning up voter rolls prior to the December 8

senatorial elections. The CPP suspended the planned protest while the LCC continued to work with stakeholders to address some of the concerns raised.

On June 18, with the support of UNICEF and in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and the National Public Health Institute, the IRCL began an interfaith effort to train 510 field workers from Christian and Muslim communities to implement its “faith-based action plan” to help curb the spread of COVID-19 in several counties, including Bomi, Bong, Grand Bassa, Grand Gedeh, Grand Kru, Nimba, Margibi, and Montserrado.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials engaged with government officials, including the President’s religious advisors and members of the legislature, 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.

Embassy officers regularly met with a variety of civil society and religious figures, including representatives 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 worked with influential religious leaders to emphasize peaceful reconciliation practices as the country continued to cope with the long-lasting effects of its civil wars.