

LIBERIA 2021 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. Muslim groups continued to call on the legislature to pass a law recognizing Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as national holidays. In May, Bomi County Senator Edwin Melvin Snowe introduced three draft bills to make the two Islamic holidays as well as Easter Monday public holidays. The draft bills gained the support of the Muslim community at large, but Christian organizations and leaders, some of whom described the actions of Senator Snowe as “unwise and hypocritical,” expressed opposition. Some Muslim organizations, however, noted improvements in government attitudes towards Muslims, citing adjustments in school examination schedules to accommodate Islamic holidays and the government’s plans to incorporate Islamic teachings into the public school curriculum. These organizations, however, pointed to the low proportion of Muslim chaplains relative to their percentage of the population and what the groups said were disproportionately low government subsidies to schools affiliated with Muslim organizations. Religious leaders urged the government to engage religious communities in proactive dialogue on contentious social issues rather than calling upon religious organizations as mediators of 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 October, leaders of the secret, traditional Poro Society detained 11 members of the Saint Assembly Ministries International Church in Gbartala, Bong County. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), local residents had expressed anger when members of the Church, who had traveled from the capital Monrovia to Gbartala to proselytize, criticized the community’s culture and traditions as being “demonic.” The 11 men were released after allegedly being conscripted by force into the society. In March, the Tyneceploh Education Foundation School reportedly expelled a six-year-old female student accused of being a witch, on the grounds that she would initiate other students into witchcraft. In July, a man in Sinoe County was subjected to a traditional “sassywood” practice – a trial by ordeal, which the government banned in 2009 – after he was accused of witchcraft, in a video widely circulated on social media.

U.S. embassy officials engaged with government officials, including the President's religious advisors, 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. In addition, embassy officials promoted religious freedom and tolerance through outreach and consultations with diverse religious leaders and communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 5.2 million (midyear 2021). 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 the Baha'i Faith, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, 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.

Christian denominations 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 traditional 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 shall have exclusive privileges or preferences and that the country shall 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 7,500 Liberian dollars (\$52) to file their articles of incorporation and an annual fee of 3,500 Liberian dollars (\$24) for registration. Foreign religious organizations pay 78,000 Liberian dollars (\$540) for registration annually and a one-time fee of 96,000 Liberian dollars (\$670) to file their articles of incorporation. Religious organizations also pay 1,500 to 2,250 Liberian dollars (\$10-\$16) to notarize articles of incorporation to be filed with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and an additional 1,500 Liberian dollars (\$10) 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 annual registration fees for each of their individual locations throughout the country, as per a government regulation issued three 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 the wake of calls since 1995 by Muslim groups and clerics for the government to recognize Islamic holidays, on May 25, Senator Snowe introduced three draft bills that would make Easter Monday, Eid al-Adha, and Eid al-Fitr public holidays. Snowe, who represents predominately Muslim Bomi County in the western part of the country, publicly noted that the introduction of the bills was not intended to bring conflict or seek favor from any segment of society, but rather represented his belief in equality and religious freedom as guaranteed by the constitution and law.

The draft bills gained the support of the Muslim community at large, but some Christian organizations and leaders expressed opposition, and some described the actions of Senator Snowe as “unwise and hypocritical.” Following the introduction of the bills, a local radio station reported that unknown armed men attacked the home of a pastor who advocated against the bills.

In May, Chief Imam of Liberia Sheikh Ali Krayee renewed calls for the government to recognize Islamic holidays, stating that the country would never have peace until Islamic holidays were granted. In July, Krayee expressed support for Senator Snowe’s religious holiday bills and stated opposition to the bills from the larger Christian community was not surprising, due to longstanding “prejudices against Muslims” on a variety of issues. In a July 20 Eid al-Adha address to the Muslim community, Krayee said denying official recognition of Islamic holidays and discriminating against Muslims were “provoking revolution in this country.” He demanded the issue of Islamic holidays be resolved by Ramadan 2022 and said that by then, “There will be freedom for everybody or freedom for nobody.” The next day, Krayee said the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL), a civil society organization that included representatives from the Liberia Council of Churches (LCC) and the National Muslim Council of Liberia (NMCL), among others, had lost the essence for which it was established in the early 1990s. He said that Muslims were being suppressed because they were not given Islamic holidays and that the IRCL was not discussing it. He said, “They should be dissolved because they are not working toward it . . . they are a council of hustlers in the name of God; they are not an inter-religious council anymore.” He also said some bishops and

pastors were seeking to increase their own relevance, at the expense of others, through the religious holiday debate.

Some Muslim leaders publicly condemned Krayee's comments. In a July 27 statement, chairman of the NMCL Imam Abdullai Mansaray – in his capacity as president of the IRCL – said the statements made by Krayee had the propensity to create hatred and confusion. The NMCL released a statement saying, “While many Muslims may consider this as a genuine call, we however hold the belief that the approach employed by the Imam [Krayee] has the propensity to create acrimony in the society and therefore does not represent the views and position of the Muslim Community in Liberia.” The council stated that the “outburst” by Krayee should be considered an act of provocation and must be condemned.

On June 8, Bishop Kortu Brown, the president of the Liberia Council of Churches (LCC), which includes Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, and Episcopalians, rejected the religious holiday bills, stating that the main goal of the LCC was to help maintain the peace in the country and that the introduction of Islamic religious holidays could trigger more interreligious conflict, as a 2004 land ownership dispute in the Monrovia suburb of Paynesville had done when it escalated into a religious riot the same year. Brown further stated Senator Snowe introduced the bills in “bad faith” and that the senator was seeking to curry political favor with the Muslim community at the expense of peace.

On June 15, more than 20 bishops and pastors describing themselves as “Leaders of the Christian Church in Liberia” presented a petition to Senate President Pro-Tempore Albert Chie calling on the Senate not to pass the religious national holidays bills. Reading the petition out loud, Bishop Isaac Winker of the Dominion Christian Fellowship said the bills were inimical to peace and a product of a religious crisis in the country. Winker further described the action of Senator Snowe as misplaced, since, he said, the constitution does not discriminate against any religion. Bishop Winker labeled as a “national security threat” the May statement by Chief Imam Krayee that the country would never have peace until Islamic holidays were legally recognized.

In July, Grand Mufti Sheikh Abubakar Sumaworo criticized some imams for calling for “the use of force” to demand that the government grant Islamic holidays, although Sumaworo expressed support for the bills that would grant the holidays. Sumaworo said that if the bills were not passed, then Muslim students should at least continue to be exempted from taking exams during Islamic holy days, which he said regularly occurred already. For example, he noted that the

domestic office of the West African Examination Council (WAEC) was scheduled to administer public school exams on July 20, which coincided with Eid al-Adha; the WAEC postponed the exams when the scheduling issue was brought to its attention. Sumaworo expressed appreciation for President George M. Weah's proclamation exempting Muslims from work in public institutions on Eid al-Adha but noted that this proclamation did not extend to schools and private organizations.

In an August 16 statement published in the newspaper *FrontPage Africa*, the Liberia Islamic Network Incorporated (LNI) defended Krayee and criticized the NMCL, calling its July statement against the chief imam disrespectful and likely to cause division among Muslims. The LNI said it saw nothing wrong with Krayee's sermon, saying it was intended to guide Muslims to channel their advocacy constructively.

Muslim leaders stated that the community had long experienced unequal government treatment relative to Christians, including, but not limited to, the issue of religious holidays. They said, for example, that government institutions employed disproportionately few Muslim chaplains relative to the Muslim percentage of the population. Each of the 19 government ministries reportedly had a Christian chaplain, while the Senate had five and the House of Representatives had two. In practice, and by tradition, Christian chaplains led a Christian invocation before the start of public events or official business, with an Islamic prayer at the end. With the exception of the Supreme Court, the armed forces, and the Office of the President, however, few, if any, other institutions had Muslim chaplains to lead such a prayer.

Muslims also reported the government provided disproportionately more subsidies to schools affiliated with Christian organizations than to those affiliated with Muslim organizations, although the government stated it provided these subsidies to schools based on need, through an application process.

Some Muslim organizations, however, noted some improvements in government practices. The National Muslim Council of Liberia publicly congratulated the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the WAEC Secretariat for adjusting national exams scheduled for 3rd and 6th graders, which fell on Eid al-Fitr, to allow Muslim students to observe the end of Ramadan holiday and take the exams on a different day. The National Imam Council also stated the MOE was planning to include basic Islamic teachings in the curriculum for public schools throughout the country.

Religious leaders continued to recommend that the government engage religious communities in proactive dialogue on social and other issues, such as COVID-19 awareness and vaccinations, political violence and disputes, and economic development, rather than calling upon religious organizations as mediators only after problems developed. As in years past, the IRCL called for and facilitated dialogue between the government and some opposition figures during the year. Religious leaders continued to express willingness to mediate in conflict situations as an extension of their proactive dialogue on social issues.

In March, the LCC condemned what it described as “a growing wave of violence” in the country and called on the government to investigate incidents and bring perpetrators to justice. The LCC cited gasoline bomb (Molotov cocktail) attacks at the home of Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Joseph Nagbe on March 10 and at the National Elections Commission headquarters on March 15, and a reported exchange of gunfire between national police and alleged armed robbers in the Bushrod Island area of Monrovia. The LCC said these developments were inimical to fostering peace, security, and stability.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Human rights organizations continued to note an increase in reports of harmful traditional practices, including accusations of witchcraft and ritualistic killings, as well as other violent practices – such as female genital mutilation – within traditional secret societies, such as the Sande Society. Religious and human rights organizations also stressed the need to clearly define the boundaries between traditional beliefs and religion so that religion would not be used to justify harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation.

Religious organizations stated that in some parts of the country, inhabitants held firm to traditional practices and did not welcome Christian evangelists.

On October 25, local media reported that on October 5, leaders of the secret Poro Society detained 11 members of the Saint Assembly Ministries International Church in Gbartala, Bong County. According to Assistant MIA Joseph Jangar, residents there had expressed anger when members of the Church, who had

traveled from Monrovia to Gbartala to proselytize, criticized the culture and traditions of the community as “demonic.” Community leaders said villagers detained the Saint Assembly Ministries members in a nearby town in order to turn them over to the local authorities for violating traditional culture. The MIA confirmed the release of all 11 Church members on October 7 following a sit-in protest by Church members at the ministry in Monrovia demanding their release. The MIA said, however, that the Church members had been allegedly conscripted by force into the Poro Society before their release.

On March 16, the Tynceplloh Education Foundation School in Monrovia reportedly expelled six-year-old female student Catherine Karma, whom they accused of being a witch, on the grounds that she would initiate other students into witchcraft. An unidentified source from the school told media that school administrators told the student’s parents to take her to pastors for what they termed “deliverance prayers,” after which the parents should provide a note from the church or pastor confirming that the child was free from witchcraft practices as a precondition of her being accepted back into the private school. The parents called on the MOE, the MIA, children’s rights advocacy groups, and civil society groups to investigate the situation. Humanists Liberia, with the support of the civil society organization Advocacy for Alleged Witches, issued a statement calling for “a swift, publicly written apology” to Catherine and her family. The statement said, “We are also calling on the government to assist with counseling of Catherine and family and to take punitive action against the school to send a strong deterrence to others in the habit of falsely accusing their compatriots of witchcraft. The issue of witchcraft is a long-standing dogma that has alienated many and stifled development. It is time to tackle it head on!”

On July 31, in Jeadeapo Statutory District in Sinoe County, individuals subjected a man identified only as Wesseh to a traditional “sassywood” practice – trial by ordeal that includes violence to extract confessions from the accused – after he was accused of witchcraft in a video widely circulated on social media. The practice was banned by the government in 2009. Traditional witch doctors also accused Wesseh of causing the deaths of two persons and the disappearance of a teenager. The national police investigated the matter and said the trial by ordeal against Wesseh, if proven, could lead to charges against the perpetrators ranging from aggravated assault to attempted murder. At year’s end, however, authorities had filed no charges and made no arrests in the case. Some Sinoe County residents said they were concerned about what they said was mob justice being carried out by some traditionalists in the area and appealed to the head of the National Traditional Council of Liberia as well as to the MIA for urgent intervention.

During an October 25 meeting, the NMCL said traditional leaders in Bong County forcibly initiated two men belonging to the Mandingo ethnic group into the Poro Society in October.

The Baha'i Spiritual Assembly said that in March, local community members in Grand Gedeh County accused 12 Baha'is of witchcraft. The men were stripped naked and forced to undergo "cleansing," despite the assembly appealing to the MIA's local office to intervene. Local leaders levied fines against the 12 men, reportedly resulting in some of them selling their goods and property to pay the fines. Baha'i community members said the forced "cleansing" process went totally against their teaching.

In October, the IRCL helped resolve a conflict with ethnoreligious aspects in Palala, Bong County. The incident involved the death of a 15-year-old boy from the predominantly Christian Kpelle ethnic group who was an apprentice in a motor vehicle repair shop owned and operated by a male guardian from the predominantly Muslim Mandingo ethnic group. An IRCL investigation concluded that the boy likely died from internal injuries sustained in an accidental explosion of a car's airbag. In addition, the town chief set up a 15-person jury comprised of local Muslims, Christians, medical workers, and town elders to investigate the incident; the jury also concluded the death was accidental. However, suspicion surrounding the death remained, as bruises from possible beatings were seen on the body of the deceased, according to witness accounts to the IRCL investigators and the media. A member of the IRCL said that statements from some Mandingo community members that Mandingos had died at the hands of Kpelle guardians in the past raised suspicions about the incident. Kpelle community members then threatened to burn down mosques in the area, which prompted a counterthreat by members of the Mandingo ethnic group to burn down Kpelle churches. According to the IRCL member, the IRCL eased tensions by meeting with the victim's family and his guardian, in coordination with the police, and stressing the need to remain calm.

According to its chairman, the IRCL also mitigated tensions with the National Imam Council of Liberia (NICOL), headed by Chief Imam Krayee, after he called for the IRCL to be dissolved during his Eid al-Adha message to the Muslim community and a national radio broadcast in July. The IRCL said that after a conflict mitigation discussion with Krayee, NICOL promised to join with the IRCL to enhance interreligious dialogue in the country.

In October, the IRCL stated that it planned to modify its constitution to permit groups that were excluded, such as the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community and the Baha'i Faith, to become members. By year's end, however, the IRCL took no action on this issue. The existing constitution of the IRCL granted membership only to what it defined as historically mainline traditional Muslim and Christian organizations. The IRCL said it would encourage these groups and others to join; several had expressed interest in joining but were not aware of the IRCL's constitutional limitations.

Christian, Muslim, and interfaith organizations promoted tolerance, dialogue, and conflict resolution through training sessions, workshops, and community meetings. In addition, the LCC held several workshops and outreach events on social issues with government agencies and international partners.

In January, the LCC condemned what it said had been the government's unsuccessful attempt, during December 2020 midterm senatorial elections and a national referendum, to pass eight constitutional amendments that would have reduced the terms of office of the President, Senate, and House of Representatives; amended the constitution to change the date of general elections; and decreased the time the Elections Commission had to investigate complaints.

On August 4, in what the LCC said was an effort to revive discussion of the recommendations in the 2009 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report, the LCC held a one-day meeting with stakeholders to discuss the findings of the LCC's 2021 perception survey on the report. According to LCC Secretary General Christopher Toe, the survey engaged 2,000 persons in five counties: Bong, Grand Bassa, Margibi, Montserrado, and Nimba. Without providing details on methodology, the LCC said the survey showed that more than half of those surveyed agreed that warlords and leaders of fighting factions during the country's two civil wars (1989-2003) should be punished under the law, while nearly three-fourths agreed 58 of the worst offenders should be prosecuted by a domestic court for the commission of high crimes.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials engaged with government officials, including the President's religious advisors, to promote interfaith dialogue and to stress U.S. government support for religious freedom and tolerance in connection with issues relating to historical accountability, land disputes, and ethnic tensions.

In May and June, the U.S. Ambassador met with leaders and members from a number of religious groups, both large and small. During the meetings, LCC and IRCL representatives spoke about issues concerning corruption, impunity, and religious tolerance, including the proposed bills on religious holidays. The Ambassador stressed the need for the religious organizations to continue their efforts in maintaining peace in the country and stressed that the United States continued to champion and support religious freedom.

Embassy officers regularly met with a wide range 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 lingering effects of its civil wars.