

MADAGASCAR 2021 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 beliefs against abuses by government or private actors. Muslims born in the country continued to report that despite generations of residence, some members of their community were unable to acquire citizenship. Muslim leaders again reported that some Muslims continued to encounter difficulty obtaining official documents and services from government offices because of their non-Malagasy-sounding names. On multiple occasions the government consulted with the leadership of different religious communities regarding COVID-19 response measures and helped facilitate access for Protestant clergy to visit COVID-19 patients in public hospitals. Representatives of some evangelical Christian churches, however, expressed disappointment that they were not invited to such consultations. Religious leaders also cited discrepancies between the number of individuals permitted to attend religious services and the number permitted to take part in other public gatherings. The government addressed these issues following consultations with religious groups. One Muslim leader criticized the government for not consulting with that religious community when rescheduling COVID-delayed national secondary school exams to overlap with the Eid al-Adha holiday. Members of some Muslim groups denounced political interference in their internal affairs by current and former political leaders.

Members of some evangelical Protestant churches continued to report they experienced discrimination in employment practices due to their religious affiliation, especially those who observed a Saturday Sabbath.

U.S. embassy officials engaged with Ministry of the Interior officials responsible for registration of religious groups. Embassy officials also discussed Muslim citizenship issues with ministry officials and legislators. Embassy officials engaged with religious leaders throughout the year and met with human rights organizations to discuss issues affecting some religious communities, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulties some Muslims encountered in acquiring citizenship. At embassy-sponsored events, senior embassy officials discussed with religious leaders the impact of national developments such as COVID-19 restrictions and vaccination efforts on religious communities, as well as other issues affecting religious life in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 27.0 million (midyear 2021). According to Pew Research Center data for 2021, 85.3 percent of the population is Christian, 3 percent is Muslim, 4.5 percent adhere to traditional beliefs, and 6.9 percent have no affiliation. It is common to alternate between religious identities or to mix traditions, and many individuals hold a combination of indigenous and Christian or Muslim beliefs.

Muslim leaders and some local scholars estimate Muslims constitute between 15 and 25 percent of the population. Muslims predominate in the northwestern coastal areas, and Christians predominate in the highlands. According to local Muslim religious leaders and secular academics, the majority of Muslims are Sunni. Citizens of ethnic Indian and Pakistani descent and Comorian immigrants compose a significant portion of the Muslim community, although ethnic Malagasy converts to Islam have now reached 65 percent of the total Muslim community, according to a Muslim leader who spoke during a TV debate in January.

Local religious groups state that 70 percent of the population is Christian, comprised as follows: Roman Catholics (34 percent of the population), Presbyterian Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM Church, 18 percent), Lutherans (14 percent), and Anglicans (4.5 percent). Smaller Christian groups include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and a growing number of local evangelical Protestant denominations.

There are small numbers of Hindus and Jews.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religious thought and expression and prohibits religious discrimination in the workplace. Other laws protect individual religious beliefs against abuses by government or private actors. The constitution states that such rights may be limited by the need to protect the rights of others or to preserve public order, national dignity, or state security. The labor code prohibits religious discrimination in labor unions and professional associations.

The law requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of the Interior. By registering, a religious group attains the legal status necessary to receive direct bequests and other donations. Once registered, the group may apply for a tax exemption each time it receives a donation, including from abroad. Registered religious groups also have the right to acquire land from individuals to build places of worship; however, the law states landowners should first cede the land back to the state, after which the state will then transfer it to the religious group. 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 registration requirements may instead register as “simple associations.” Simple associations may not receive tax-free donations or hold religious services, but the law allows them to conduct various types of community and social projects. Associations engaging in dangerous or destabilizing activities may be disbanded or have their registration withdrawn. Simple associations must apply for a tax exemption each time they receive a donation from abroad. If an association has foreign leadership and/or members of the board, it may form an association “reputed to be foreign.” An association is reputed to be foreign only if the leader or members of the board include foreign nationals. Such foreign associations may only obtain temporary authorizations, subject to periodic renewal and other conditions. The law does not prohibit national associations from having foreign nationals as members.

Public schools do not offer religious education. There is no law prohibiting or limiting religious education in public or private schools.

The government requires a permit for all public demonstrations, including religious events such as outdoor worship services.

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

Government Practices

The government continued to include Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha in the list of national holidays and consulted the Muslim community when setting the appropriate dates. The dates of the official exam for students completing secondary school had to be rescheduled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, causing it to overlap with the Eid al-Adha holiday. The leader of a Muslim organization made a statement in local media criticizing the government for its failure to consult

all entities, including the religious community, in setting the dates for official exams.

On January 12, authorities in Sambava rejected the local Muslim community's request for a construction permit to build a new mosque, citing as grounds for its rejection the presence of another religious building in the same area, the absence of an appropriate parking lot, and concerns about excessive noise. Members of the Sambava Muslim community said they believed the rejection of the construction permit was discriminatory, given the presence of a Christian church in the same area that regularly rang its church bells. Later, the authorities issued the construction permit stating their decision was made to ensure social peace, and the new mosque was inaugurated in September.

In February, local authorities closed one of the churches of the local Jesosy Mamonjy (Jesus the Savior) evangelical Christian group in the Ankondrano area of Antananarivo after an internal disagreement concerning the election of new leaders of the group devolved into a physical altercation that injured two persons. Due in part to its inability to resolve the internal conflicts, the church in Ankondrano remained closed while other Jesosy Mamonjy churches throughout the country continued to operate normally, according to media reports. The Prefect of Antananarivo announced on December 14 the reopening of the church after the members had reached a compromise.

According to leaders of different groups within the Muslim community, current and former political leaders interfered "excessively" in their internal affairs as they sought to capture Muslim political support. The Muslim leaders stated this political interference hindered resolution of an internal leadership dispute dating from 2016, which resulted in two different groups in the Muslim community, each with its own political party leader sponsor, establishing their own leadership boards and nominating their own candidates to lead the national Malagasy Muslim Association. The Ministry of Interior recognized both new boards officially in 2016, leaving two competing sets of Muslim leadership in place since then.

In June, parliament voted to postpone consideration of an amendment to the 2017 nationality law that would provide as many as 15,000 Muslim residents citizenship in the country, according to one of the amendment's sponsors in 2020. Muslim leaders continued to state that the existing nationality law affected the Muslim community disproportionately, since it prevented descendants of immigrants, many of whom were Muslim, from acquiring citizenship, even after generations of residence in the country. The leaders said that Muslim children of ethnic Indian,

Pakistani, and Comorian descent had the most difficulty obtaining citizenship. Members of the Muslim community continued to face challenges in the country because of their statelessness. Under the law, for example, only Malagasy citizens could own land or property. In addition, they faced difficulties with access to education, healthcare, and employment.

Religious groups stated the government did not always enforce registration requirements and did not deny requests for registration. All the large religious groups were registered. As of the end of 2020, (the most recent information available) the Ministry of Interior reported 383 officially registered religious groups, compared with 373 at the end of 2019. The government acknowledged that some registered groups may have become inactive or dissolved without informing the government.

Religious leaders, including representatives of the evangelical Vahao ny Oloko (Release my People) Christian Church, continued to state that inadequate government enforcement of labor laws resulted in some employers requiring their employees to work during regular days of worship.

The leadership of the Muslim Malagasy Association again reported that some Muslims continued to encounter difficulty obtaining official documents, such as national identity cards and passports and services, from public administration offices because of their non-Malagasy-sounding names. The leaders again said that government officials harassed and mocked Muslims and considered them to be foreigners even when they possessed national identity cards. In one example, the Ministry of Commerce denied assistance to a Muslim entrepreneur with a halal certification who sought the ministry's support to combat counterfeit halal products and protect Muslim consumers. According to the Muslim leaders, instead of offering their assistance, the ministry's officials stated the Muslims were the wrongdoers and were committing the fraud themselves.

State-run Malagasy National Television continued to provide free broadcasting to Seventh-day Adventists, Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Presbyterians on weekends, and to the Muslim community on Fridays. During Ramadan, it provided additional broadcast time to the Muslim community. Members of the Federation of Evangelical Churches received daily free airtime to broadcast religious services every morning on public radio and television.

A Christian church leader reported the government was increasingly open to dialogue with religious leaders regarding important decisions related to the

government's COVID-19 response and religious practices. For example, on March 30, President Andry Rajoelina convened the leaders of the Confederation of the Christian Churches of Madagascar, representing the four main Christian churches – Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican and Presbyterian – to discuss the safest way to celebrate Easter in the context of the pandemic. In April, the Ministry of Public Health met with Protestant leaders and subsequently authorized Protestant clergy to visit COVID-19 patients in public hospitals under specified conditions. The government provided personal protective equipment to religious leaders during such visits.

Representatives of some evangelical Christian churches, however, said that they felt marginalized in the government's COVID-19 consultations and believed the authorities subjected them to more stringent requirements when requesting administrative services, such as using state-owned venues for public events. Leaders of the Vahao ny Oloko Church said they were dismayed that the Minister of Public Health did not invite their leadership to April COVID-19 consultations, even though they were among the groups that advocated that the government should enable religious communities to help comfort COVID-19 patients.

In general, church leaders stated they believed that COVID-19 mitigation measures, which were lifted in September, were unevenly enforced and disadvantaged religious communities. As an example, they noted that authorities would only allow up to 50 persons to attend Mass or other religious services under the restrictions, while more participants were allowed to participate in nonreligious events. A Protestant church leader said, however, that after negotiations with the authorities, they were allowed to have more attendees in religious services as long as they observed health safety rules and social distancing. All churches were given similar permission.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Leaders of the Muslim Malagasy Association continued to say some members of the public associated them with Islamists and extremists. Other Muslim leaders, however, reported generally good relations between members of their community and other faiths across the country. In November, a Muslim leader said there was fear within the Muslim community that the COVID-19 vaccine was a conspiracy on the part of the mainstream population to harm Muslims living in Madagascar.

Adherents of some evangelical Protestant churches, especially those celebrating their Sabbath on Saturdays, again stated that they were sometimes denied access to employment and believed it was due to their religious affiliation.

During the year, leaders of evangelical churches stated that some female members of their churches were victims of violence committed by their husbands because they did not agree with their wives' religious beliefs. The leaders said they believed such problems would continue until there is wider sensitization to and acceptance of evangelical beliefs.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives periodically met with the Ministry of Interior officials and legislators to discuss concerns among different religious faiths, including Muslim statelessness issues and internal conflicts within some Christian churches.

Embassy officials interacted regularly with religious leaders, especially during the pandemic health emergency, to discuss the impact of COVID-19-related restrictions on religious activities. Embassy officials also met with human rights groups and international organizations, including the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, concerning religious freedom and other human rights issues, such as statelessness.

On September 22, a senior embassy official hosted a number of religious, political, and economic leaders to discuss various topics affecting public life, including human rights and religious freedom.