

MADAGASCAR 2022 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. Members of the Muslim community and of evangelical groups decried political interference in their internal affairs by elected leaders and high-ranking government officials.

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. Other members reported discrimination and scorn from their families and at school.

U.S. embassy officials engaged with Ministry of the Interior officials responsible for the registration of religious groups. Embassy officials also discussed ongoing Muslim citizenship issues with human rights groups and international organizations. Throughout the year, embassy officials engaged religious leaders to discuss religious freedom and regional interfaith coexistence.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 28.2 million (midyear 2022). According to Pew Research Center data for 2021, 85.3 percent of the population are Christian, 3 percent are 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 and southeastern coastal areas, and Christians predominate in the highlands. According to local Muslim religious leaders and secular academics, the majority of Muslims are Sunni. There is a smaller Shia Muslim community of about 300 people located in the northwestern coastal region. Citizens of ethnic Indian and Pakistani descent and Comorian immigrants compose a significant portion of the Muslim community, despite an increase in recent converts to Islam among the Malagasy population.

Local religious groups state that 70 percent of the population are Christians, comprising 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 but may hold religious services as well as 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

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. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize citizenship discrimination based solely on Muslim identity. 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 accessing education, healthcare, and employment.

The leadership of the Fikambanan'ny Silamo Malagasy (Association of Malagasy Muslims) continued to report that some Muslims encountered difficulty obtaining official documents (e.g. 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.

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.

In August, new disputes arose within the evangelical church Jesosy Mamonjy (Jesus the Savior) after members of the church contested the results of the election of new board members the previous month. The contesting members decried the interference of a high-ranking politician and asserted he leveraged his influence with the Ministry of the Interior to recognize the new board despite election irregularities. Church members opposed to the new leadership continued to demonstrate during weekly religious services, culminating in physical altercations between members. On August 28, security forces assigned by authorities to maintain order within the church's compound arrested four members, charging them with offenses against public order. Members from the opposition group denounced the action as arbitrary arrest, denying accusations of troublemaking and accusing security forces of arresting only members opposed to the new board. The court granted a temporary release to the arrested members two days later and no known further action had been taken as of year's end.

Board members of the Association of Malagasy Muslims who stated they had authority to represent the Muslim community, complained that excessive political interference thwarted them from resolving internal leadership issues dating from 2016. They asserted that a court decision validated their board in 2018, and two other appeal judgments confirmed this decision respectively in September and October. However, a few elected members of parliament and other high-ranking officials, according to the board members, continued to support other Muslim

members who undermined their leadership, inciting serious disagreements within their community with impunity.

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 399 officially registered religious groups, compared with 383 at the end of 2020. Between January and November, the ministry registered nine new religious groups and did not deny any requests for registration. 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.

In July, a teacher in Toamasina who was supervising the official examination at the end of secondary school, required a Muslim female candidate to remove her headscarf to be permitted into the examination room. A Muslim community leader denounced the incident as a violation of freedom of religion. Other leaders within the community regarded it as an arbitrary decision taken by a civil servant, as the law does not prohibit religious attire during official examinations.

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 free airtime to broadcast religious services every morning on public radio and television.

Representatives from the Muslim community and from some evangelical Christian churches stated that the government exercised preferential treatment toward the larger Christian churches. The evangelical Christian community asserted that although the President or other high-ranking government officials regularly attended events organized by the larger Christian churches, they never appeared at events planned by the evangelical churches. They also stated they never

received donations from the state, while the larger Christian churches benefited from government donations. Muslim leaders in some regions stated that authorities never invited them to attend periodical interfaith events organized by regional chiefs.

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.

Adherents of some evangelical 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. They also reported that children of some of their members sometimes experienced mocking and bullying by their classmates due to their religious affiliation.

During the year, leaders of evangelical churches stated some female parishioners were victims of violence committed by their husbands who did not agree with their religious beliefs. They also stated that new converts to their churches suffered psychological harassment by relatives or friends due to their religious affiliation. Evangelical church leaders reported isolated disagreements with people residing near their places of worship in rural regions, but they indicated these issues were generally resolved without resorting to legal action. Leaders of some evangelical groups reported being featured in harsh news articles and social media posts that portrayed them as greedy and financially dishonest. They believed the authors of such articles and posts intended to incite hatred and discrimination against them and their religious communities.

Representatives of Christian churches in Manakara accused Muslim community members of enticing their adherents to convert to Islam. They accused Muslim leaders of taking advantage of the worsening socioeconomic situation affecting the local population due to the recent natural disasters. The Christian churches stated the Muslim community offered free food, free access to school, and donations of school supplies to attract new converts.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy representatives periodically met with Ministry of the Interior officials to discuss the registration status of religious groups.

Embassy officials interacted regularly with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom as well as the restriction of religious expression affecting communities of faith. 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 statelessness.

In early October, embassy staff members met with a group of local religious leaders from different faith communities during a field visit to the southwest region of Toliara and met with another similar group in Manakara in the Southeast region in December. During the meetings, religious leaders unanimously reported good interreligious coexistence in their region but also indicated that they believed authorities exhibited preferential treatment toward certain religious denominations.