

# LIBERIA 2022 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 organizations noted improvements in government attitudes towards Muslims, citing as an example, adjustments in school examination schedules by the Monrovia Consolidated School System (MCSS) to accommodate the observance of Islamic holidays by students. According to the National Imam Council of Liberia (NICOL), such improvements helped ease tensions in the Muslim community. NICOL also pointed to the low number 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 continued to urge 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. Several religious organizations, including but not limited to the Baha'i Spiritual Assembly, continued to protest the forced initiation and occasional abduction of their members by leaders of the traditional Poro (male) and Sande (female) secret societies in rural communities.

U. S. embassy officials engaged with government officials, including the president's religious advisors, to promote interfaith dialogue and stress U.S. government support for religious freedom and tolerance in connection with problems 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 5.4 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2008 National Population and Housing Census, which remains the most recent, 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 Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Baha'i Faith, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and Sikhs. Muslim organizations continue to dispute these official statistics, stating that Muslims constitute up to 20 percent of the population, and they called for the government to conduct a new census, which concluded on January 10, with provisional results expected in January 2023.

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 Grand Cape Mount County in the west. The traditional Poro (for males) and Sande (for females) societies – often referred to as “bush” or 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 Glebo 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 (L\$) (\$49) to file their articles of incorporation and an annual fee of L\$3,500 (\$23) for registration. Foreign religious organizations pay L\$78,000 (\$508) for registration annually and a one-time fee of L\$96,000 (\$625) to file their articles of incorporation. Religious organizations also pay L\$1,500 to L\$2,000 (\$10 to \$13) to notarize articles of incorporation to be filed with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and an additional L\$1,500 (\$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 are able to register at the business entity level, in compliance with a government regulation issued four years ago. Previously they reported being charged annual registration fees for each of their individual locations throughout the country, leading to cumulative large total registration fees.

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**

Muslim organizations noted improvements in government attitudes and policies affecting them. According to NICOL, these improvements helped ease tensions within the Muslim community. On April 12, the administration of the MCSS issued a statement on the observance of the holy month of Ramadan that ordered all the system-operated schools closed on May 2 in observance of Eid al-Fitr. The statement further granted permission to all MCSS female Muslim students to wear the hijab during the month of Ramadan, which is normally not allowed as part of the school uniform during the rest of the academic year. Muslim organizations welcomed the MCSS gesture and noted it was a big step toward religious tolerance. NICOL called on the Monrovia City Corporation (MCC) to follow the example of the MCSS by granting a municipal holiday to Muslims in Monrovia to commemorate Eid al-Fitr in 2023 or it would boycott any future events hosted by the MCC to mark the end of Ramadan. NICOL also urged Ministry of Education authorities to take steps similar to those taken by the MCSS to enable Muslim students across the country to freely join students in Monrovia to celebrate Eid al-Fitr.

Additionally, in response to a communication from Chief Imam of the Republic of Liberia Ali Krayee asking authorities to allow Muslim students to celebrate Eid al-Fitr freely, the administration of the African Methodist Episcopal University, in a letter dated April 19, agreed to postpone midterm examinations scheduled to begin on May 2, the date of the official celebration of Eid al-Fitr, and to reschedule them to begin on May 3. Krayee and the NICOL leadership applauded what they termed as a positive step taken by the university towards fostering national unity and peaceful coexistence.

During this year's observance of the month of Ramadan, the government announced that President George Tawlon Manneh Oppong Ousman Weah, on its behalf, donated cash and bags of rice to Muslims across the country's 15 counties

in what some observers believed was the biggest donation since 2018. Remarking on the donation on April 11, Minister of Internal Affairs Varney Ali Sirleaf said the L\$4,500,000.00 (\$29,000) in cash and 3,150 bags of rice was the government's way of identifying with the Muslim community during a time of fast and prayer for the peace, reconciliation, and well-being of the citizens and the nation. Minister Varney also said that a committee has been put in place to work out the arrangements for Muslims to partake in the Hajj – the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca – during the year. Making remarks on behalf of the Muslim community, the chairman of the National Muslim Council, Abdullah Mansaray, thanked President Weah for the donation and said that Allah has declared that it is important to acknowledge kind gestures.

During his end of Ramadan speech on May 2, the Grand Mufti of Liberia, Sheikh Abubakar Sumaworo, urged Muslims to stop asking the government for national holidays. Sumaworo instead asked Muslims to acknowledge the generous role of the government, especially towards the Muslim community, through rice and food donations that enabled Muslims to break their fast during the month of Ramadan. Sumaworo acknowledged the peaceful nature of the month of Ramadan during the year, adding that as a show of unity and solidarity, every Muslim in the country started and concluded fasting together without interruptions.

During a January 14 meeting with religious leaders in Monrovia, President Weah urged them to participate in events commemorating the country's bicentennial celebration by playing an active and productive role. Smaller religious organizations, including the Baha'i Spiritual Assembly and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission, noted that they had not received an official invitation, nor did they play a role during the commemorative activities, although they would have liked to have been involved. In contrast, major Muslim and Christian organizations received invitations and were involved during the bicentennial celebrations.

On February 11, during a special bicentennial prayer service for Muslims at the Benson Street Mosque, Chief Imam Ali Krayee demanded that the government remove the statue of a "naked female" from the Centennial Pavilion Building in Monrovia as a sign of reconciliation and called on the government to organize a working holiday in honor of King Sao Bosso Kamara, a historical Muslim leader, to show appreciation for the role played by Muslims in the formation of the country.

Krayee also suggested a reconciliation meeting of the 15 counties to resolve long-standing conflicts and requested that national programs that fall on a Friday be delayed until after Friday services. For his part, Imam Abdullah Mansaray underscored that the bicentennial celebration reinforced reconciliation, forgiveness, and inclusiveness for all Liberians, irrespective of political, tribal, or religious affiliation.

Although Muslim leaders continued to report that their community had long experienced unequal government treatment relative to Christians, including, but not limited to, the issue of religious holidays, they made fewer public demands of the government for religious holidays due to a perceived fear of possible political scapegoating so close to an election year in 2023, according to Imam Krayee during an October 18 meeting. They acknowledged, however, that these longstanding grievances continued to exist without any noticeable improvement or change. For example, government institutions employed disproportionately few Muslim chaplains relative to the Muslim percentage of the population. In contrast, each of the 19 government ministries reportedly had a Christian chaplain, with five in the Senate and two in the House of Representatives.

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, few, if any, institutions had Muslim chaplains to lead a benediction.

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 subsidies to schools based on need, through an application process.

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. Religious leaders continued to express willingness to mediate in conflict situations as an extension of their proactive dialogue on social issues.

On June 3, during an induction ceremony at Providence Baptist Church for newly elected officials of the Liberia Council of Churches (LCC), newly elected president Reverend Samuel Broomfield Reeves, Jr. vowed to stand strong against what the LCC termed “get rich quick” activities through the misuse of government positions and power. He added that the LCC “will take no money from the government for national church related programs, such as Fast and Pray Days, among other activities,” and that “the church will support the church.”

On September 19, the LCC condemned a video on social media that insinuated that President Weah planned to rig the 2023 general elections. Addressing a press conference in Monrovia, LCC President Reeves called on Liberians regardless of religious, social, political, ethnic, or economic affiliation to cherish the country’s peace, stating that “it is the sole responsibility of the LCC to seek peace, mediate dialogue, and prevent chaos.”

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Human rights organizations continued to call upon the government to intervene in and investigate cases of persons accused of witchcraft being injured or killed as the result of exorcisms and trials by ordeal. On July 15, news radio reported that unknown persons tortured four persons in Sinoe County, in the southeast of the country, and that one later died, as a result of accusations of practicing witchcraft.

Several religious organizations, including Christian and Muslim groups and the Baha’i Spiritual Assembly, continued to voice alarm over the forced initiation of their members by leaders of traditional Poro (male) and Sande (female) secret societies. In October, NICOL noted the forced initiation of one of its members, 60-year-old Geebah Dorley from Zuaah Town, Seuhn Mecca District, in Bomi County. NICOL claimed traditional society members seized Dorley as he went to gather sticks to make charcoal.

NICOL also reported that in early October, members of traditional secret societies abducted two teenage boys in Sumo Town, Seuhn Mecca District, in Bomi County. NICOL noted that the abductors initiated and released the victims in late November/early December after being held for about two months, despite several appeals to the National Traditional Council of Liberia to release the boys. Both Zuaah and Sumo Towns are predominantly Muslim. Imam Mustapha Dorley

of NICOL said that he was forced to call off the traditional celebration marking the birth of the prophet Muhammad in Bomi County due to fear of seizure and forced initiation by the secret societies. Imam Dorley remarked that he had received a tip that he was a target after he headed a delegation to present a petition to Minister of Internal Affairs Varney Ali Sirleaf that demanded the release of Geebah Dorley and the two teenage boys seized in Sumo Town.

On October 2, the newspaper Independent Probe reported that leaders of the secret Poro Society, also known as “bushmasters” or “zoes,” kidnapped a member of the United Liberia Inland Church in Sanniquellie, Nimba County. The victim, Aaron Gbain, a 28-year-old officer of the Liberia Fire and Rescue Service, was standing guard at an immigration checkpoint when the incident occurred. Gbain remained in the custody of the bushmasters for a week, but due to pressure from the church, which had planned to hold a peaceful protest for the release of their member, the bushmasters released him and apologized for their actions. In an unusual move, the traditional bushmasters apologized to the church for forcibly initiating their congregant. According to news reports, Aaron was the fourth abduction/initiation victim from the United Liberia Inland Church.

According to Imam Krayee, conflict-mitigation discussions between the Inter-religious Council of Liberia (IRCL) and NICOL did not achieve the overall objective of resolving underlying tensions between the two organizations. The LCC, one of the constituent organizations that (along with the National Muslim Council of Liberia) make up the IRCL, was more receptive to NICOL’s joining the IRCL. Krayee noted that the National Muslim Council had opposed NICOL’s membership in the IRCL, which caused a breakdown of the conflict-mitigation discussions. A few weeks before the celebration of Eid al-Adha, NICOL urged members of the public wanting to do business with the Muslim community to deal directly with NICOL instead of the National Muslim Council. Krayee claimed that the true representation of Muslims in the country rested with the imams of Liberia and NICOL and not with the National Muslim Council.

On August 9, a cross-section of religious leaders from Christian and Muslim organizations met in Monrovia for a two-day sensitization seminar on countering money laundering and combating the financing of terrorism. The seminar emphasized the role of religious leaders in raising awareness and shaping the attitudes of members of their congregation and followers through the force of



morally persuasive messages. Edwin Harris, the director general of the Intergovernmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa, noted that religious leaders wield considerable influence among their followers that could be channeled to for the good of society.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

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

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.

Through meetings, consultations, and visits to religious sites during the year, embassy officials worked with influential religious leaders to emphasize peaceful reconciliation practices as the country continued to cope with the lingering effects of its civil wars.