

LIBERIA 2015 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 or order or the rights of others. It also provides for equal protection under the law. A nascent campaign to have the legislature declare the country a “Christian nation” engendered nationwide discussion. The government discouraged traditional and religious burial rites due to the epidemic of Ebola virus disease (EVD) in the first half of the year.

There were sporadic, localized quarrels between religious and traditional groups, but because ethnicity and religion were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize incidents as solely based on religious identity. In June many local business owners under the banner Margibi Muslim Council closed their shops in Kakata, Margibi County, to protest what they saw as the Christianizing of the country. On September 24, a group of youth verbally provoked and threw stones at a Muslim group praying in Saclepea, Nimba.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives encouraged government officials to continue to promote religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy organized outreach to young religious leaders, including a discussion on religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.1 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2008 National Population and Housing Census, the population is 85.6 percent Christian, 12.2 percent Muslim, 0.6 percent adherents of indigenous religious beliefs, 1.4 percent persons who claim no religion, and less than 1 percent members of other religious groups, including Bahais, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists. The Muslim percentage of the population is a source of contention, as unofficial reports and surveys estimate Muslims constitute between 10 and 20 percent of the population. Many members of religious groups incorporate elements of indigenous beliefs into their religious practices. Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and members of the United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), AME Zion, and a variety of Pentecostal churches.

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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. Ethnic groups in some regions participate in the traditional practices of secret societies.

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, and no one shall be hindered in the enjoyment of these rights except as required by law to protect public safety, order, health, or morals, or the rights of others. It also provides for equal protection under the law and prohibits political parties that exclude citizens from membership on the basis of religious affiliation.

The government encourages all religious groups, except for indigenous ones, to register their articles of incorporation and their organizations' statements of purpose. Organizations may register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning. Registered organizations, including missionary programs, religious charities, and religious groups, receive tax exemption and duty-free privileges – benefits not afforded unregistered groups. Registered groups may also appear in court as a single entity. Religious groups characterize registration as voluntary and routine.

The law requires high-level government officials to take an oath ending with the phrase, “So help me God,” when assuming office. Christians kiss the Bible and Muslims the Quran on those occasions.

Public schools offer nonsectarian religious education as an elective in all grades but do not require it.

Government Practices

The majority of delegates of the Constitutional Review Conference in April endorsed the proposition to declare the country a “Christian Nation” as one of 25 possible constitutional amendments in the 2016 national referendum. Religious leaders from the Catholic, Episcopal, Baptist, Lutheran, and Muslim communities

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opposed the initiative, while some evangelical Christian pastors and some members of the national legislature supported it. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and a former minister of internal affairs publicly opposed the proposed constitutional amendment.

In response to the EVD epidemic during the first half of the year, the government discouraged traditional and religious burial rites that could potentially increase the number of infections.

The government, through city ordinances and presidential proclamations, required businesses and markets, including Muslim-owned or -operated businesses and shops, to remain closed on Sundays for municipal street cleaning and on Christmas in accordance with the National Patriotic Observance law. Since penalties – consisting of fines of up to 200 Liberian dollars (\$2.27) – were not strictly enforced, some Muslim-owned or -operated shops opened for limited hours on Sundays.

Government ceremonies commonly included opening and closing prayers. The prayers were usually Christian but occasionally were both Christian and Muslim. In Lofa County, where a large number of Muslims reside, opening and closing prayers were alternately Christian and Muslim.

The government subsidized private schools, most of which were affiliated with either Christian or Muslim organizations, and subsidies were provided proportionally, based on the number of students.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Sporadic, localized quarrels between religious and traditional groups occurred in remote parts of the country, but because religion and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Religious and tribal leaders mediated such incidents and regularly had the support of the National Police. On September 24, a group of youth verbally provoked and threw stones at a Muslim group praying in Saclepea, Nimba. The Interreligious Council (which includes Christian and Muslim groups) was immediately notified, the police intervened, and the incident did not escalate.

According to a news report, in June many local business owners, under the auspice of the Margibi Muslim Council, closed their shops in Kakata, Margibi County, to

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protest what they characterized as the Christianizing of the country. The council reportedly stated that the country's desire to Christianize was a "conspiracy against Muslims" who were citizens.

Some employers excused Muslims from employment or classes to attend Friday prayers, although there was no legal requirement to do so.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In response to the campaign to declare the country a "Christian Nation," the U.S. Ambassador and embassy staff engaged with government officials to stress the U.S. government's support of religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy also met with a variety of civil society and religious figures.

During Ramadan, the embassy led outreach programs focused on Muslim youth, including a discussion on peace building and religious tolerance. The Ambassador also visited two of the larger mosques in greater Monrovia, where she met with leading imams and their congregations to underscore the theme of religious tolerance. Embassy officials also began a dialogue with young religious leaders – Christian, Muslim, and Bahai – on the need for religious tolerance, especially during election cycles.