



Madagascar

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion; however, a constitutional referendum was approved by the electorate on April 4, 2007. Amid numerous other changes, the explicit separation of church and state was eliminated with the deletion of the word "secular" from the description of the republic.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 19,448,815 square miles and a population of 18 million. Although precise official figures were unavailable, approximately half of the population is Christian. There are four main Christian denominations. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest denomination, followed by the Reformed Protestant Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM). The Lutheran and Anglican Churches account for most of the remainder of the country's Christians. A significant minority of citizens followed traditional indigenous religions.

Muslims constitute slightly less than 10 percent of the population, with strong concentrations in the north and the northwest. Aboriginal and ethnic Indians and Pakistanis who immigrated over the past century made up the majority of the Muslims in the country. There is a small number of Hindus among the ethnic Indian population. The country has a very small Jewish population.

There are several foreign missionary groups that operate freely. Several faith-based organizations, some with international affiliations, are involved in health and social services, development projects, schools, and higher education.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full, and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. There is no state religion. The April 4 constitutional referendum eliminated the explicit separation of church and state, but did not diminish legal protection for freedom of religion. President Ravalomanana occasionally expressed a desire to transform the country into "a Christian state;" however, there was no attempt to establish a state religion, and most believed his comments only indicated a desire to enshrine Christian principles in the day-to-day life of the country. President Ravalomanana's position as a lay vice-president of FJKM, one of the country's four principal Christian denominations, generated some allegations that church and state interests are not kept entirely separate.

The law mandates that religious organizations register with the Ministry of Interior. By registering, religious organizations acquire the legal status necessary to receive direct bequests and other gifts. To qualify as a religious association, groups must consist of at least 100 members, with an elected administrative council of no more than 9 members, each of whom must be a Malagasy citizen. If the group's leadership and faithful are foreign (as is the case with the majority of the country's Muslims), they have the right to form an association "reputed to be foreign." Once the association's membership expands to 1,000 members, the administrative council may apply to be officially recognized. The state officially recognizes 9 houses of worship and 109 religious organizations. The Ministry approved five new religious organizations between

March 2006 and April 2007. No religious group was denied registration during the period covered by this report.

Religious organizations that fail to meet the Ministry of Interior's registration requirements are free to register as simple associations. Simple associations do not have the right to receive gifts or hold religious services. If these groups overstep what is allowed for their status, they violate the law and in rare circumstances are subject to legal action. In 2007 ministry officials estimated there were more than 1,000 religious organizations in the country operating without official state recognition, including both simple associations and unregistered organizations.

Christian holy days such as Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Assumption, All Saints' Day, and Christmas are celebrated as national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Numerous religious organizations operated freely in all regions of the country, often disseminating their message through public and private media. Religious organizations were granted free access to state-run media provided that their use constituted a public service. During the month of Ramadan, for example, the national television station broadcasted a daily 15-minute program that included the call to prayer. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of any religious organizations that were denied free access to state-run media.

The Government banned the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (EURD), based on a threat to law and order. The Ministry of Interior stated that if the applications to reconstitute the church fulfilled the legal requirement of having Malagasy leadership, they would likely be approved. Former members of banned organizations face higher scrutiny when petitioning for recognition as an official religious organization.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

Some members of the Muslim community stated that the President's failure to invite them to events such as prayer breakfasts and public holidays featuring religious leaders marginalizes the community. They also expressed concern about their legal status in the country, as some lacked citizenship despite their long-standing presence; others suggested their ethnic/religious difference sometimes led to more limited access to government services.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Representatives of the Embassy regularly meet with leaders of religious communities, including minority groups.

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