



Madagascar

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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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 during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

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 228,880 square miles, and its population is approximately 17.5 million. Although precise official figures were unavailable, approximately half of the population was Christian. There were four main Christian denominations. The Roman Catholic Church was the largest denomination, followed by the Reformed Protestant Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM). President Ravalomanana was re-elected to a second term as lay vice-president of the FJKM in August 2004. The Lutheran and Anglican Churches accounted for most of the remainder of the country's Christians. Most other citizens followed traditional indigenous religions. Muslims constituted 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 was a small number of Hindus among the ethnic Indians. The country had a very small Jewish population.

There were several foreign missionary groups that operated freely. Most of these were Christian and include Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Several faith-based organizations, some with international affiliations, were 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. There is no state religion. President Ravalomanana has occasionally expressed a desire to transform the country into "a Christian state"; however, there has been no attempt to establish a state religion, and most believe his comments indicated a desire to enshrine Christian principles in the day-to-day life of the country.

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 one hundred members, with an elected administrative council of no more than nine 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 one thousand members, the administrative council may apply to be recognized as a church. The state officially recognizes nine churches and 104 religious organizations.

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. In 2004, ministry officials estimated there were more than one thousand religious organizations in the country operating without official state recognition, including both simple associations and unregistered organizations.

The Malagasy Council of Christian Churches (FFKM) is the umbrella organization for the country's four principal Christian denominations. The FFKM is composed of the Roman Catholic, FJKM, Lutheran, and Anglican Churches, and is a key player in a broad range of issues. The FFKM is a traditional leader in education. Recently its role has expanded to include coordinating a national campaign against HIV/AIDS and monitoring elections. In the political arena, the FFKM has generally served as a mediator, bringing together antagonistic factions; however, it has occasionally taken an overt position on political issues. During the 2001 presidential campaign and the ensuing political crisis, it supported Marc Ravalomanana, then mayor of Antananarivo, in his ultimately successful bid for the presidency. President Ravalomanana's position as a lay vice-president of FJKM still generates some allegations that church and state interests are not kept entirely separate. In April 2005 President Ravalomanana was criticized on these grounds following his keynote speech at a three-day World Bank-sponsored

FJKM colloquium on the role of church leaders in the country's development.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedoms

Numerous religious organizations operate freely in all regions of the country, often disseminating their message through public and private media. Religious organizations are granted free access to state-run media provided that their use constitutes a public service. During the month of Ramadan, for example, the national television station broadcast a daily fifteen-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.

On September 16, 2005 the Government banned the New Protestant Church in Madagascar (FPVM), led by Pastor Randrianatoandro, for illegally occupying churches assigned to the mainstream Reformed Protestant Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM); the ban was implemented in November. The FPVM broke away from the FJKM church in 2002 and took approximately 300,000 worshippers with it. The FPVM claimed the owners offered the buildings, most of which were wood and thatch huts, to the church. The FPVM challenged the ban in court, which refused to rule on the ban, charging that only President Ravalomanana could overturn the decision to ban a church. President Ravalomanana was a lay vice president in the FJKM, and some observers charged that the closure of the church was politically motivated. The FPVM appealed, and on April 19, 2006, the Supreme Court issued an order requiring the Government to provide proof of the basis for the ban by May 19, 2006. As of June 15, 2006, the Government had not replied to the Supreme Court's order.

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (EURD), banned on January 11, 2005, for failure to properly register, was not permitted to reopen. The Government expelled all foreign EURD pastors. Soon after the church was banned, the Ministry of Interior confirmed receipt of several petitions from former EURD congregations to form a new official religious organization. The ministry stated that as long as the applications 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. Nonetheless, the ministry approved six new religious organizations since the abolition of the EURD in 2005.

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

The generally amicable relationships among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Ethnic Malagasy occasionally express resentment toward members of the predominantly Muslim Indo-Pakistani ("Karana") community. This attitude derives from the relative economic prosperity of the Karana and is not based on their religious affiliation. Some members of the Muslim community state that the President's failure to invite them to events featuring religious leaders marginalizes the community.

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. In April 2006 representatives of the embassy met with leaders of the Muslim community to discuss their concerns about inclusion in Malagasy political life. The embassy provided materials to a small library at a major mosque in Antananarivo.

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