

# LIBERIA 2018 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, or 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. Christian and Muslim organizations called upon the government to pay greater attention to interfaith dialogue and the needs of the Muslim community, while Muslim organizations continued to call for official recognition or observance of Islamic holidays, a greater role in official ceremonies, and accommodation in government institutions. Tribal organizations called upon the government for help in dealing with cases of purported witchcraft, while human rights organizations called upon the government to help prevent some harmful practices associated with indigenous beliefs.

Some religious groups continued to advocate for official recognition of the country as a “Christian nation,” while many others opposed the initiative. Numerous religious groups worked toward interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution.

The Ambassador and embassy officials engaged with government officials, to include the Human Rights Division of the Ministry of Justice, members of the legislature, and others, in support of efforts to preempt religious tensions during the change of administrations and to stress U.S. government support of religious freedom and tolerance in connection with the continued campaign to declare the country a “Christian nation.” The Ambassador and embassy officials promoted religious freedom and tolerance across government and society through outreach to religious leaders and communities. The embassy hosted an iftar with participants from different faith communities during Ramadan.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.8 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2008 National Population and Housing Census, the population is 85.6 percent Christian, 12.2 percent Muslim, 1.4 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 Baha’is, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists. Unofficial reports and surveys estimate Muslims constitute

up to 20 percent of the population. Christian churches include 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 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 the west. The Sande and Poro societies – often referred to as 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 Bodio priests, exist in the country's 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 should have exclusive privileges or preferences, and the country should 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 (MFA) and pay a one-time fee of 6,900 Liberian dollars (\$44) to file their articles of incorporation and an annual fee of 3,600 Liberian dollars (\$23) for registration and a registration certificate. Foreign religious organizations pay 50,100 Liberian dollars (\$320) for registration annually and a one-time fee of 62,600 Liberian dollars (\$400) to file their articles of incorporation. Religious organizations also pay 1,000 to 2,000 Liberian dollars (\$6 to \$13) to the Liberia Revenue Authority for notarization of articles of incorporation to be filed with the MFA and an

additional 1,000 Liberian dollars (\$6) 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, where each of the other offices has representation.

Registered religious organizations, including missionary programs, religious charities, and religious groups, receive tax exemptions on income taxes and duty-free privileges on goods brought into the country, privileges not afforded unregistered groups. Registered groups may also appear in court as a single entity.

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, which includes an overview and history of religious traditions and an emphasis on moral values.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

A number of religious organizations, Christian and Muslim, cited the government’s perceived indifference to the interests of the Muslim community as having the potential to fuel long-term grievance and instability.

A number of Muslim organizations continued to express concern over the government’s reluctance to recognize or observe major Islamic religious holidays, while continuing to recognize Christmas as a public holiday and the second Friday in April as Fast and Prayer Day, the latter sometimes coinciding with Good Friday. Muslim organizations credited the administration of President George Weah, which took office in January, with granting one day of leave to government employees celebrating Eid al-Fitr in June but continued to advocate making Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha national holidays. Muslim organizations have requested to make Eid al-Fitr a national holiday since 1995. The Baha’i community also submitted a petition before the 1999-2003 civil war to recognize its religious holidays, and their organization’s leadership reaffirmed interest in the matter but did not resubmit the petition.

The government, through city ordinances and presidential proclamations, required businesses and markets, including those owned or operated by Muslims, to close on Sundays and Christmas for municipal street cleaning. Some Muslim business owners said they viewed the regular street cleaning as an excuse for the government to close all businesses in honor of the Christian Sabbath.

Members of the Muslim and Baha'i communities working in government or public positions said government agencies continued to be reluctant to grant time off to observe religious holidays.

The inauguration of President Weah and the July 26 Independence Day celebration included opening and closing prayers from Christian clergy; representatives from the Muslim community were invited to attend as guests but not to participate in the official ceremony.

According to Muslim religious leaders, the government employed a disproportionate number of Christian chaplains in comparison to Muslim chaplains to serve in government institutions when compared to the religious demographics of the country. The government reportedly employed only two Muslim chaplains – one in the armed forces and one in the Supreme Court. The legislature and many other government institutions exclusively employed Christian chaplains, who frequently read Christian prayers before starting official business.

In May the inspector general of the Liberia National Police met with the country's chief imam and Muslim communities and assured the Muslim community of his administration's commitment to their safety during Ramadan.

In March President Weah appointed two religious advisors, both Christians, as part of the new administration. Representatives of Muslim organizations said they viewed them as gatekeepers rather than intermediaries, controlling access to the president rather than facilitating outreach. Representatives of Muslim religious organizations said they hoped to see a Muslim religious advisor or a more direct link between the Office of the President and the Muslim community.

The government continued to subsidize private schools, most of which were affiliated with Christian and Muslim organizations. The government provided subsidies proportionally, based on the number of students, but Muslim leaders said the subsidies disproportionately favored Christian schools.

Before leaving office in January, former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf signed an executive order on domestic violence banning the practice of female genital mutilation. The order would remain in force for one year unless extended. Some observers saw the order as a repudiation of traditional secret societies, which combine religious and cultural practices, and engaged in the practice as part of their indoctrination ceremonies. Others complained the order was not enforced, leading to an increase in reported cases. In December the National Traditional Council promised to halt Poro and Sande society activities during the academic year, so as not to prevent young inductees from attending school. The council also undertook an inventory of all existing chapters of the secret societies, also called “bushes” or “groves,” and the head of the council requested local chiefs to refrain from opening new chapters.

In October a news report noted that the head of a traditional council of chiefs in Nimba County called upon the government to intervene in cases of persons injured through practices described as witchcraft, and it accused police and prosecutors of failing to intervene. The report, and others, reported an increase in cases of trial by ordeal, also known as “sassywood,” in which those accused of witchcraft undergo painful or dangerous experiences in an attempt to prove their innocence.

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

Human rights organizations noted an increase over the past year in ritualistic killings and other violent practices within traditional secret societies.

In August local news outlets reported a Christian clergyman in Nimba County had been abducted and inducted into the Poro secret society against his will. Local news also reported in August that a man was arrested for killing and removing body parts from a seven-year-old child, purportedly in a ritualistic killing.

Sporadic local quarrels between religious groups occurred in remote parts of the country but did not result in violence. Since religious and tribal identities are often linked, it was difficult to categorize these incidents as driven solely by religious factors.

The Liberian Muslim Women’s Network reported a few instances of workplace discrimination against women wearing headscarves.

Some religious groups continued to advocate for official recognition of the country as a “Christian nation,” an effort that began in 2015 and became a divisive issue

during the 2017 election cycle. Many religious organizations, including the Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Muslim communities, continued to oppose the effort. Both Christian and Muslim religious organizations continued to express concern about what they said was the implied prejudice of the proposal and its potential for exacerbating tensions between religious groups.

A wide variety of Christian, Muslim, and interfaith organizations worked throughout the year to promote tolerance, dialogue, and conflict resolution through training sessions, workshops, and community meetings. The Catholic Peace and Justice Commission mediated local disputes between Christian and Muslim residents, and the Liberian Council of Churches conducted an interfaith program. An interfaith group held a two-day workshop in September to discuss ways to address harmful traditional practices. The Liberian Council of Churches and the National Muslim Council participated in the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL), the country's foremost interfaith organization.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim and Baha'i communities previously applied to participate in the IRCL and expressed their desire to join, but were not admitted as members.

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

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

In connection with the continued campaign to declare the country a "Christian nation," and to support efforts to preempt possible religious tensions caused by the transition to a new administration, the U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials engaged with government officials, including officials from the Ministry of Justice's human rights division, members of the legislature, and others, to stress the U.S. government's support of religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy encouraged peaceful dialogue from all parties.

The embassy also met with a variety of civil society and religious figures, including representatives of a variety of Christian, Muslim, Baha'i, and traditional religious groups. In discussions with religious leaders, the Ambassador emphasized the separation of state and religion in both the U.S. and Liberian legal traditions.

The embassy worked with religious leaders to emphasize peaceful reconciliation practices as the country continues to cope with the effects of its civil wars and

build upon existing networks to de-escalate any religious tensions. During Ramadan, the embassy conducted outreach to Muslim communities.

During the year embassy officials met with Christian, Muslim, Baha'i, and traditional leaders to discuss tolerance and the importance of religious leaders and adherents working to bring communities together. The embassy hosted an iftar with participants from different faith communities during Ramadan.