



## Malawi

### 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.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious beliefs or practices; however, there was some tension between Christians and Muslims during the period covered by this report.

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 45,747 square miles and a population of 13 million. Eighty percent of the population is Christian. Among the Christian groups, the largest are the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), with smaller numbers of Anglicans, Baptists, evangelicals, and Seventh-day Adventists. There is a substantial Muslim minority totaling approximately 13 percent of the population. The vast majority of Muslims are Sunni, adhering to either the Qadriya or Sukutu groups. There are also Hindus, Baha'is, and small numbers of Rastafarians and Jews. Four percent of the population define themselves as atheist, although this may include adherents of informal traditional African beliefs.

Foreign missionary groups are present in the country.

#### 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. In a 2007 ruling, the Supreme Court declared that religious freedom is a right that cannot be limited or restricted. There is no state religion.

There are no separate requirements for the recognition of religions, but religious groups must register with the Government. A religious group must submit documentation detailing the structure and mission of its organization along with a nominal fee for review by the Ministry of Justice. Once approved, a religious group registers formally with the Registrar General's Office in Blantyre. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports that the Government refused to register any religious groups.

The Government observes both Christian and Muslim holy days. Public holidays in the country include Eid al-Fitr, Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas.

Foreign missionaries experienced occasional delays in renewing employment permits. This appeared to be the result of bureaucratic inefficiency rather than a deliberate government policy against foreign missionaries. Missionaries and charitable workers pay lower fees for employment permits than do other professionals.

The President, Bingu wa Mutharika, is Catholic, and the Vice President is Muslim. Several cabinet members and parliamentarians are Muslim. President Mutharika regularly sends official regards to members of all faiths in the country on appropriate religious holidays.

As a result of previous debate, many public schools offer a course entitled "Bible Knowledge," which is Christian oriented, and another entitled "Moral and Religious Education," which includes Muslim, Hindu, Bahai, and Christian material. Both courses are voluntary.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

In contrast to previous reporting periods, there were no reports of conflict between government and Rastafarian leaders over an unofficial ban on long hair in public schools. Although there is no law relating to hair length, some schools prohibit long hair as part of their dress code. Government officials maintain that this policy is not intended to infringe upon any religious rights.

Regional voting trends and political affiliation sometimes reflect the concentration of different religious groups in certain regions of the country.

Religious leaders were free to speak publicly on political and social matters.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor United States 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 beliefs or practices; however, there were occasional tensions between Christians and Muslims that appeared to be fueled largely by politics. Although there were no significant conflicts, these minor tensions were especially evident following attempts by the country's Christian President to remove the Muslim Vice President from office. Christians, Muslims, and a small Hindu minority generally coexisted peacefully, often participating in business or civil society organizations together.

#### 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. U.S. embassy officials maintain frequent contact with leaders and members of all religious communities in the country.

During the period covered by this report, the Embassy continued to promote religious tolerance through grants, meetings, exchange programs, and the distribution of reading materials.

The Embassy hosted a 2 week speaker program on Muslim life in America and religious tolerance in April 2007. As part of that program, the Ambassador hosted an ecumenical dinner that brought together Muslim and Christian leaders. On several occasions, embassy officials appeared on local radio programs ( including a Radio Islam program) to discuss issues of religious freedom and tolerance.

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