



Liberia

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there were some exceptions during the reporting period.

There was some improvement in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) tolerated religious freedom.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Despite interaction among religious groups, some tension remained evident. In Monrovia, religious violence between ethnic Mandingo Muslims and other ethnic groups during 3 days in October 2004 resulted in the destruction of several churches and mosques, other extensive property damage, and approximately 25 deaths. In rural areas, tension between Muslim Mandingos and ethnic Lormas, Kissi, and Gbandi eased considerably, but tension remained high in Nimba County between Gias, Manos, and Mandingos. There was also tension in Bong County between the Mandingos and the Kpelles, who are predominantly Christians and animist.

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 43,000 square miles. Its population is estimated at 3.4 million. As much as 40 percent of the population practices either Christianity or Christianity combined with elements of traditional indigenous religions. Approximately 40 percent exclusively practices traditional indigenous religions. Approximately 20 percent of the population practices Islam, which continued to gain adherents. A small percentage is Baha'i or atheist.

Christian denominations include the Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), and AME Zion denominations, as well as a variety of Pentecostal churches. Some of the Pentecostal movements are affiliated with churches outside the country, while others are independent.

The Muslim population is mainly from the Mandingo and Vai ethnic groups, which are found predominantly in the West. Ethnic groups throughout the country participate in the traditional religious practices of the Poro and Sande secret societies. Christians live throughout the country.

A large number of foreign missionary groups work in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The NTGL at all levels strives to protect these rights. The NTGL did not harass, marginalize, or attempt to intimidate the Muslim population.

There is no state religion. Government ceremonies open and close with prayers and may include the singing of hymns. The prayers and hymns are usually Christian, but occasionally are Islamic. There are four Muslim Cabinet Ministers.

Former President Charles Taylor divided the National Muslim Council of Liberia by seeding the Council with his loyalists, and members of the Council remain divided. Sheikh Konneh, the former National Muslim Council leader, formed a separate council and is acting Chairperson of the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRC), a well-known organization formerly led by Archbishop Michael Kpakala Francis. The IRC coordinated peace efforts among the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy

(LURD) and Movement for Democracy in Liberia rebels, and the ex-government/pro-Taylor forces, and has continued to promote interreligious dialogue and reconciliation.

In January 2005, the NTGL did not sponsor a Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, but 33 members of the Muslim Council of Liberia made the pilgrimage, led by Alhaji Ibrakim Fumba Sheriff. A few independent Muslims made the pilgrimage as well.

Major Christian holy days, including Fast and Prayer Day, Easter, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas, are observed as national holidays while Islamic holy days are not. The NTGL mandates that public businesses and markets, including Muslim businesses and shops, remain closed on Sundays and major Christian holy days, an issue that Muslim leaders have brought to the Legislative Assembly. There is no legal requirement to excuse Muslims from employment or classes for Friday prayers, although some employers do so.

All organizations, including religious groups, must register their articles of incorporation with the Government, along with a statement of the purpose of the organization. Traditional indigenous religious groups are not required to register, and generally do not. Registration is routine, and there were no reports that the registration process was burdensome or discriminatory.

The Government permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools. Religious education, particularly Christian education, is taught in public schools but is not mandatory. Students can opt out of religious instruction, and parents may enroll their children in private schools for religious reasons.

Members of the military service have churches and mosques accessible near their barracks. The military provides chaplains for members of major religious groups as well as minority groups.

The NTGL has not specifically dedicated material resources to anti-bias and religious tolerance education. However, it is supportive of efforts to promote interfaith understanding and has urged the IRC to continue its efforts to encourage interreligious dialogue.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

Although several Muslims hold senior government positions, including four ministerial posts, many Muslims believe they were bypassed for desirable jobs on account of their religion.

High-level government officials were required to take oaths based on their religious beliefs when assuming their new office.

The Government responded to requests for the restitution of religious properties. In the Taylor era, government militia seized some properties belonging to ethnic Mandingo Muslims. Since 2003, most confiscated properties have been abandoned or returned to their owners. All religious groups had an equal opportunity to reclaim property formerly belonging to their religious organizations, particularly if used to hold religious services.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Since 2003, there have been no arrests based on religion or ethnicity. No state executions based on religion took place in the period covered by the report.

During the reporting period, there were no reports that persons were detained without charge or placed under house arrest based on their religious beliefs or practices.

All religious and political detainees held by Taylor's government were released, and the NTGL did not detain anyone on the basis of their religion.

Forced Religious Conversion

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions contributed to religious freedom. The IRC promotes dialogue among various religious communities. In October 2004, a property dispute escalated into widespread violence between Mandingos, who are predominantly Muslim, and other predominantly Christian ethnic groups. The violence broke out in Monrovia and spread to Kakata and other nearby towns and villages. At least 25 persons were killed, and several mosques and churches were looted and burned. The United Nations Peacekeepers (UNMIL) brought the situation under control after 3 days. The violence was widely regarded as a reflection of ethnic rather than religious tensions.

The country's civil war, which ended in 2003, had a religious undertone in that the LURD rebels were mostly Muslim Mandingos while government troops were mostly animists and Christians. Ethnic tensions persist between the Mandingo and several other ethnic groups.

Ritual killings, in which killers remove body parts from their victims for use in traditional rituals, continued to occur during the reporting period. There is little reliable information available about traditional religions associated with ritual killings, and the number of such killings is difficult to ascertain. Many believe that practitioners of traditional indigenous religions among the Grebo and Krahn, who are concentrated in the southeast, engage in ritual killings. Body parts of a person believed to be powerful are considered the most effective for ritual purposes. In some cases, the rituals reportedly involve eating body parts to gain special powers. Fighters on all sides of the civil war reportedly engaged in such practices. In January, a dusk to dawn curfew was imposed in Maryland County after riots broke out over the Government's failure to address a spate of ritual killings. There were a few reports of ritual killings in and around Monrovia, but no evidence to support such claims.

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. The Ambassador and other Embassy officers met with the IRC and other Christian and Muslim leaders to discuss religious freedom issues. The U.S. Government provided funding to the IRC and assisted with other logistical support to facilitate the IRC's work in promoting interreligious dialogue and its efforts to end the civil conflict.

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