

LIBERIA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom.

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

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives, as well as the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, engaged with government officials and with religious and community leaders to promote religious freedom and tolerance and to bolster national reconciliation after years of civil war.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at four million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2008 National Population and Housing Census, the population is 85.6 percent Christian, 12.2 percent Muslim, 0.6 percent adherents of indigenous religious beliefs, 1.5 percent persons who claim no religion, and less than 1 percent members of other religious groups, including Bahais, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists. The estimated percentage of the Muslim population is a source of contention. Unofficial reports and surveys estimate Muslims constitute between 10 and 20 percent of the population. Many members of religious groups incorporate elements of indigenous beliefs into their religious practices. Christian groups include Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of the United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), AME Zion, and a variety of Pentecostal churches.

Christians reside throughout the country. Muslims belong mainly to the Mandingo ethnic group, which resides throughout the country, and the Vai ethnic group, which lives predominantly in the west. There is also a predominantly Muslim Fula community throughout the country. The Fula people are referred to as a community not by location, but as a tribal segment of society. Ethnic groups in some regions participate in the indigenous religious practices of secret societies.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

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Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

The law requires high-level government officials to take an oath when assuming office. Christians kiss the Bible and Muslims the Quran on those occasions.

The government requires that all organizations, including non-indigenous religious groups, register their articles of incorporation along with their organizations' statements of purpose. Registration is reportedly routine. The government does not require indigenous religious groups to register.

Public schools offer religious education that is in principle non-sectarian as an elective in all grades but do not require it. The government subsidizes private schools, most of which are affiliated with either Christian or Muslim organizations, and neither religious group is favored.

Government Practices

The government encouraged public businesses and markets, including Muslim-owned or operated businesses and shops, to remain closed on Sundays and Christmas even though there was no legal basis for that action. The government, however, permitted some Muslim-owned or operated shops to open for limited hours on Sundays.

Government ceremonies commonly included opening and closing prayers. The prayers were usually Christian but occasionally were both Christian and Muslim. In Lofa County, where a large number of Muslims reside, opening and closing prayers were alternately Christian and Muslim.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There were demonstrations, however.

On March 19, the Liberian Restoration to Christian Heritage Committee campaigned at the Capitol with a petition signed by 700,000 Christians to designate Liberia as a Christian state. Their petition was submitted to the legislature but not acted upon. On March 26, a group of Muslims under the name

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Liberians United for the Adherence and Preservation of the Liberian Constitution assembled at the Capitol in opposition to the Christian Heritage Committee. This group did not present a petition but asked the legislature to reject any petition to make Liberia a Christian state. Both campaigns had permits and the protests ended peacefully.

Sporadic localized quarrels between religious groups occurred in remote parts of the country, but because ethnicity and religion are often closely linked, it was difficult to distinguish whether the motivation for such incidents was primarily ethnic or religious intolerance. Religious and tribal leaders mediated such incidents. In September traditional and ethnic leaders in Lofa County seized and detained for three days a Christian pastor who allegedly did not respect town customs, which comprised roadside sweeping, periodic cleaning of the stream, and other traditional practices. The district commissioner and other local authorities intervened and the pastor was released. The issue remained unresolved at the end of the year, with Muslim and Christian tribal leaders and elders asking the pastor and church to respect the traditions or leave the area. Minister of Internal Affairs Dukuly visited Lofa County in November as part of an effort to reduce tensions between Christians and traditionalists.

There was no legal requirement to excuse Muslims from employment or classes for Friday prayers, although some employers did so.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives engaged with the government and civil society on religious freedom and tolerance issues. Public diplomacy efforts were a strong component of this engagement and included an iftar, visits to religious institutions, and meetings with religious leaders. During Ramadan the embassy led outreach programs focused on Muslim youth, including a discussion on peace building and religious tolerance. In September the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited Liberia and discussed religious freedom with government officials and leaders of all religious groups, including the Traditional Council (TC). The TC represents those who maintain indigenous religious beliefs and is led by a chief elder, but many members are also Christian. The Ambassador at Large solicited ideas on how to use the Liberian model of religious freedom and tolerance in other African countries.