

LIBERIA 2014 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 or order or the rights of others. It also provides for equal protection under the law. The government discouraged traditional and religious burial rites due to the epidemic of Ebola virus disease (EVD).

There were sporadic, localized quarrels between religious and traditional groups, but because ethnicity and religion were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize incidents as solely based on religious identity. Unlike the previous year, there were no reports of incidents of religious intolerance in Lofa County.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives encouraged government officials and religious leaders to continue to promote religious freedom and tolerance and organized outreach to Muslim youth, including a discussion on religious tolerance. Embassy representatives worked with religious groups and charities and traditional chiefs and elders who practiced indigenous religious beliefs in efforts to combat EVD, including sharing information on safe funeral and burial practices.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.1 million (July 2014 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 Baha'is, 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.

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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. Ethnic groups in some regions participate in the indigenous religious practices of secret societies.

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, and no one shall be hindered in the enjoyment thereof except as required by law to protect public safety or order, or the rights of others. It also provides for equal protection under the law and prohibits political parties that exclude citizens from membership on the basis of religious affiliation.

The law requires high-level government officials to take an oath ending with the phrase, "So help me God," when assuming office. Christians kiss the Bible and Muslims the Quran on those occasions.

Public schools offer non-sectarian religious education as an elective in all grades but do not require it.

Government Practices

The government, through city ordinances and presidential proclamations, required businesses and markets, including Muslim-owned or operated businesses and shops, to remain closed on Sundays for municipal street-cleaning and on Christmas in accordance with the National Patriotic Observance law. Since penalties, consisting of small fines of up to 200 Liberian dollars (\$2.44) were not strictly enforced, some Muslim-owned or operated shops opened 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.

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As it did with other organizations, the government encouraged all religious groups, except for indigenous ones, to register their articles of incorporation along with their organizations' statements of purpose. Organizations could register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Planning. Registered organizations, including missionary programs, religious charities, and religious groups, received tax exemption and duty-free privileges – benefits not afforded unregistered groups. Registration was voluntary, routine according to religious groups, and also allowed religious groups to appear in court as a single entity.

The government subsidized private schools, most of which were affiliated with either Christian or Muslim organizations, and subsidies were provided proportionally, based on the number of students.

Under the State of Emergency declared by President Sirleaf August 6, which expired November 12, the government could restrict certain religious activities, specifically traditional burials and funeral rites, to prevent the spread of the Ebola virus. Through print media and radio broadcasts, the government discouraged traditional funeral ceremonies in favor of safe burials.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Sporadic, localized quarrels between religious and traditional groups occurred in remote parts of the country, but because religion and ethnicity were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Religious and tribal leaders mediated such incidents. The government continued efforts to address problems resulting from incidents of religious intolerance that occurred in Lofa County in 2013. These efforts which were suspended after the outbreak of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) included urging the Liberia Council of Churches to collaborate with the Ministry of Internal Affairs to reduce tensions. There were no new reports of religious intolerance in Lofa County.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives engaged with the government and civil society on religious freedom and tolerance issues during an embassy-hosted 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. The U.S. Ambassador and embassy staff also partnered with religious organizations and charities in efforts to combat EVD. The Ambassador and other U.S. Embassy representatives worked with religious groups, including Muslims and chiefs and elders who practiced indigenous religious beliefs, urging them to collaborate with the government and others in efforts to combat EVD, particularly by sharing information on safe funeral and burial practices.