

LIBERIA

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government utilized public diplomacy to support the government and religious and community leaders in their efforts to further promote religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2008 National Population and Housing Census, Christians represent 85.5 percent of the population, Muslims 12.2 percent, adherents of indigenous religious beliefs 0.5 percent, and other religions 0.1 percent, with 1.5 percent claiming no religion. There are small numbers of Baha'is, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists. Many members of religious groups practice elements of indigenous religious beliefs. Christian groups include Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME), AME Zion, and a variety of Pentecostal churches. Many churches are affiliated with churches outside the country, while others operate independently.

Christians reside throughout the country. Muslims belong mainly to the Mandingo ethnic group, which also resides throughout the country, and the Vai ethnic group, which lives predominantly in the west. The country is also home to a Fula community that is predominantly Muslim. Ethnic groups in all regions participate in the indigenous religious practices of secret societies, such as the Poro (for men) and Sande (for women). Secret societies teach traditional customs and skills to initiate youth into adulthood.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The law does not discriminate based on religion regarding citizenship and residency.

High-level government officials are required to take an oath when assuming their new offices. Christians kiss the Bible and Muslims the Qur'an on those occasions.

Government ceremonies opened and closed with prayers. The prayers were usually Christian but occasionally were both Christian and Muslim. In Lofa County, the program would alternate openings and closings between Christian and Muslim prayers.

All organizations, including non-indigenous religious groups, must register their articles of incorporation with the government along with their organizations' statements of purpose. The government did not require indigenous religious groups to register, and they generally did not.

The government treated ritualistic killings (the act of killing for body parts for use in traditional rituals) as homicides and investigated and prosecuted them accordingly. Because they are investigated as homicides, there are no reliable figures on how many suspected cases occurred during the year.

Public schools offered religious education, particularly Christian education, but did not require it. The government subsidized private schools, most of which were affiliated with either Christian or Muslim organizations.

The government observes two religious holidays as national holidays: Fast and Prayer Day and Christmas. The government mandated that public businesses and markets, including Muslim businesses and shops, remain closed on Sundays and Christmas. There was no legal requirement to excuse Muslims from employment or classes for Friday prayers, although some employers did so.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom; however, there were allegations that applications for citizenship and residency from Mandingos and

Fulas, both Muslim majority groups, received greater scrutiny than those from members of other indigenous tribes because of fears that they may be illegal entrants from neighboring Guinea.

Although the government required that all religious groups register their articles of confederation, registration was routine and there were no reports the process was burdensome or discriminatory.

During the year, the government continued repairing religious sites, including two mosques, three churches, and a Catholic school that were targeted and damaged during the February 26, 2010 violence between the predominantly Christian Lormas and predominantly Muslim Mandingos in Lofa County. The government encouraged discussions between the two groups to further dissipate tensions.

Some Muslim leaders believed certain Islamic holy days should also be observed as national holidays. The government did not address concerns by Muslim leaders of the requirement that businesses and shops remain closed on Sundays and Christmas. Leaders have unsuccessfully brought this issue before the National Legislature and the Supreme Court.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Because ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

Lingering tensions in the aftermath of the February 2010 violence between Christian Lormas and Muslim Mandingos in Lofa County dissipated after organizations worked to encourage discussion between the two groups. The Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL) promoted dialogue among various religious communities. The IRCL has an office in Lofa County that continued to work specifically on interreligious and interethnic issues.

There were reports of ritualistic killings from all parts of the country. These killings are believed to bestow power onto those conducting the ritual. Though many feared and criticized the practice, lack of community cooperation and credible witnesses generally hampered investigations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government continued to engage the government and civil society on religious freedom and tolerance issues as part of its ongoing engagement to promote human rights and reconciliation. Public diplomacy efforts were a strong component of this engagement and included an iftar (evening meal during Ramadan), a special iftar for youth, visits to religious institutions, meetings with religious leaders, and sponsorship of Liberian leaders for the International Visitor Leadership Program.