

LIBERIA 2012 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. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

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

The U.S. ambassador and embassy representatives 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

A U.S. government source estimates the population is 3.9 million. 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 Lutherans, Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, 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 most 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 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 as an elective at all levels of school, but do not require it. The government subsidizes private schools, most of which are affiliated with either Christian or Muslim organizations.

The government observes three religious holidays as national holidays: Fast and Prayer Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Fast and Prayer Day and Thanksgiving are holidays on which most Liberians, regardless of religion, go to churches or mosques.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom; however, the government imposed restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups.

While there was no legal basis for the action, the government strongly encouraged, and sometimes forced, public businesses and markets, including Muslim-owned or operated businesses and shops, to remain closed on Sundays and Christmas. The consequences of staying open were police harassment and closing down the shops, although the government allowed some Muslim-owned or operated shops to remain open for limited hours on Sundays. Muslim leaders raised this issue with the National Legislature and the Supreme Court, but by year's end had not obtained a broader exemption for Muslim-owned or operated businesses.

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 the Muslims resided, opening and closing prayers were alternately Christian and Muslim.

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Muslim leaders asked the government to observe certain Islamic holy days as national holidays, but by year's end the government had not responded to the request.

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.

In early 2012, a group of Christian churches petitioned Liberia's legislature to draft a law declaring Liberia a Christian nation; however, neither the House nor the Senate took any action.

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, a youth iftar, visits to religious institutions, and meetings with religious leaders. During Ramadan, the embassy led outreach programs targeted at Muslim youth, including a discussion on peace building and religious tolerance.