

MALAWI 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.

U.S. embassy officials maintained contact with government officials and with leaders and members of all religious groups in the country to discuss religious freedom. The embassy hosted an iftar during Ramadan. The ambassador addressed a Muslim women's conference in October and spoke about freedom of religion.

Section I. Religious Demography

The government estimates the population to be 14.8 million. Approximately 80 percent of the population is Christian. Most Christians belong to the Roman Catholic Church or the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian. There are also small numbers of Anglicans, Baptists, evangelicals, and Seventh-day Adventists. Muslims constitute approximately 20 percent of the population, and the vast majority of Muslims are Sunni. The largest concentration of Muslims is along the southern shores of Lake Malawi. There are also Hindus and Bahais, as well as small numbers of Rastafarians and Jews.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

Religious groups must register with the government by submitting documentation to the justice ministry detailing the structure and mission of their organization, along with a nominal fee. Once approved, a religious group must register formally with the Registrar General's office.

MALAWI

Foreign missionaries are required to have employment permits. Missionaries and charitable workers pay lower fees for employment permits compared to other professionals.

The law guides regulation of all broadcasting and states that, with regard to religious broadcasting, “broadcasting licensees shall not broadcast any material which is indecent or obscene or offensive to public morals (including abusive or insulting language) or offensive to the religious convictions of any section of the population or likely to prejudice the safety of the Republic or public order and tranquility.”

Religious instruction is available but not mandatory in public schools. Christian-oriented “Bible Knowledge” courses and “Moral and Religious Education” courses that include Muslim, Hindu, Bahai, and Christian material are available, but Muslim courses are not available. Individual parent-teacher associations or school committees decide which religion courses to offer.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, Eid al-Fitr, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government upheld constitutional provisions for religious freedom and protected the rights of citizens to hold and manifest their religious beliefs.

The Registrar General’s office in the justice ministry reported that 84 religious groups registered during the year.

There was a report from one religious minority regarding limited employment and educational opportunities. Rastafarian leaders continued to complain of an unofficial ban on long hair in some government-run schools. Although there is no law relating to hair length, some school dress codes prohibited long hair. In addition, according to the president of Rastafari for Unity (Malawian Rastafarian organization), Rastafarians are only able to obtain employment in the private sector because the government does not employ Rastafarians.

Some Muslims continued to request that the education ministry discontinue use of the “Bible Knowledge” course and use only the broader-based “Moral and Religious Education” course in primary schools.

MALAWI

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.

Christians, Muslims, and Hindus often participated in business or civil society organizations together. The Interfaith Public Affairs Committee, the Muslim Association of Malawi, and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace worked together on human rights and good governance issues, and implemented civic education programs.

Religious groups operated several media outlets, including radio and television stations, without government interference.

The Muslim community operated its own schools where Islamic instruction was available to students.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials maintained frequent contact with government officials and with leaders and members of all religious groups in the country to discuss religious freedom. The deputy chief of mission hosted an iftar for local religious leaders and prominent members of the Muslim community, some of whom were government officials. On October 13, the ambassador attended and addressed a conference of approximately 10,000 Muslim women. The ambassador's remarks underscored the importance of freedom of religion and appreciation of Malawi's rich diversity.