

MOZAMBIQUE 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right to practice freely or not to practice religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The constitution prohibits political parties from using names or symbols associated with religious groups. Religious groups have the right to organize, worship, and operate schools.

An insurgency led by the Islamic State-affiliated terrorist group, ISIS-Mozambique (ISIS-M), that sources said was motivated by political and socioeconomic grievances and exploited by religious extremists with a stated aim to establish an Islamic state, continued in the northern part of the country. The level of violence against civilians decreased during the year, and a senior leader of the insurgent forces was killed in August. In January, a Muslim umbrella organization condemned a group of young persons who were attempting to establish a madrassah and whom the government arrested in December 2022 on suspicion of radicalization; the organization criticized the individuals for acting without consulting religious authorities and for suspected links with terrorists. In January, the government banned a religious group that it stated was promoting child marriage, and, according to a government official, it banned other religious groups with “obscure purposes.” Religious organizations and leaders played large roles in municipal elections in October, including as polling station observers, election officials, and commentators.

ISIS-M continued to attack rural communities and kill civilians in Cabo Delgado Province in the northern part of the country. In September, an ISIS-

M attack reportedly killed at least 11 Christians; media reports quoted survivors as stating the group separated villagers based on their names before opening fire on those they supposed to be Christians. Media reports indicated that ISIS-M targeted both Muslim and Christian communities. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), news media outlets, and human rights organizations stated that socioeconomic grievances among the northern region's historically marginalized majority-Muslim population were contributing factors to the insurgency, along with religious motivations, and cautioned that casting the violence as primarily religious risked exacerbating those grievances. Muslim and Christian leaders condemned violence as a means of political change, and Muslim leaders emphasized that religious-based violence that invoked Islam was inconsistent with tenets of the faith. Muslim and Christian groups coordinated assistance to persons internally displaced by the violence in the north.

The U.S. Ambassador engaged senior officials on the violence in the northern region, noting the continued need to engage the religious community to effectively address the violence. The Ambassador and embassy officers discussed the importance of religious tolerance in promoting peace and security with representatives of religious groups and local civil society organizations, including peace clubs, and held iftars in northern Mozambique. During the year, the embassy implemented three interfaith outreach-focused programs, including one enabling Muslim and Christian leaders in Cabo Delgado to provide peacebuilding and social cohesion activities for vulnerable youth to counter the influence of violent extremism, especially as it related to religion.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 32.5 million (midyear 2023). According to 2020 data from the National Statistics Institute, 62 percent of citizens are Christian, 19 percent Muslim, and less than 5 percent are Jewish, Hindu, and Baha'i. The largest Christian groups are evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, with 33 percent of the population, Catholics with 27 percent, and Anglicans with 2 percent. The remaining 14 percent claim no religious affiliation.

A significant portion of the population adheres to syncretic Indigenous religious beliefs, a category not included in government census figures, characterized by a combination of African traditional practices and aspects of either Christianity or Islam.

Muslims leaders state that the census data is unreliable and that their community accounts for 25-30 percent of the total population, a statistic frequently reported in the press. The northern province of Cabo Delgado is the only province with a Muslim majority, but significant Muslim minority communities live throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the country as a secular state. It prohibits religious discrimination, provides for the right of citizens to practice or not practice a religion, and stipulates that no individual may be deprived of his or her rights because of religious faith or practice. Political parties are constitutionally prohibited from using names or symbols associated with religious groups. The constitution protects places of worship and the right

of religious groups to organize, worship, and pursue their religious objectives freely and to acquire assets in pursuit of those objectives. The constitution recognizes the right of conscientious objection to military service for religious reasons. These and other rights may temporarily be suspended or restricted only in the event of a declaration of a state of war, siege, or emergency, in accordance with the terms of the constitution.

The law requires all NGOs to register with the Ministry of Justice, Constitutional, and Religious Affairs (MJACR). Under the law, religious organizations are charities or humanitarian organizations, while religious groups refer to particular denominations. Religious groups register at the denominational level or congregational level if they are unaffiliated. Religious groups and organizations register by submitting an application, providing identity documents of their local leaders, and presenting documentation of declared ties to any international religious group or organization. There are no penalties for failure to register; however, religious groups and organizations must show evidence of registration to open bank accounts, file for exemption of customs duties for imported goods, or submit visa applications for visiting foreign members.

The law on money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism requires NGOs, including religious groups, to publish annual financial accounts of their income and expenditures and to keep eight years of financial records.

An accord between the national government and the Holy See governs the Catholic Church's rights and responsibilities in the country. The agreement recognizes the Catholic Church as a legal personality and recognizes the church's exclusive right "to regulate ecclesiastical life and to nominate people for ecclesiastical posts." The agreement requires Catholic Church

representatives to register with the government to benefit from the church's status. The accord also gives the Catholic Church the exclusive right to create, modify, or eliminate ecclesiastical boundaries; however, it stipulates that ecclesiastical territories must report to a church authority in the country.

The law permits religious organizations to own and operate schools. The law forbids religious instruction in public schools.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In northern Cabo Delgado Province, ISIS-M-led insurgents whose stated aims included establishing an Islamic state continued to launch violent attacks throughout the year. Sources stated that the insurgents were exploited by religious extremists and motivated by political and socioeconomic grievances. Attacks targeted government and international forces and civilian populations, although the number of attacks on civilians decreased. In August, the senior military commander of the insurgent forces was killed in battle.

From October 2017, when the violence began, to December 2023, sources stated that the attacks displaced more than one million residents and killed more than 2,100 civilians of all faiths. During the year, ISIS-M killed approximately 62 civilians in attacks. In 2019, ISIS-M publicly pledged allegiance to ISIS.

In a January statement, the Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMMO), an organization comprised of prominent Muslim faith and community leaders from around the country, disavowed any connection to a group of young persons detained in December 2022 in Pemba, the capital of Cabo Delgado Province, on suspicion of radicalization and links to terrorists. According to reports, those detained were attempting to establish a madrassah in Pemba without contacting local Muslim leaders. The CISLAMMO statement noted that by refusing the input of these recognized religious experts, the young persons aroused suspicions about extremist links.

In January, MJACR banned a religious group known as Johane Marangue, active in Manica Province in the central part of the country, for allegedly promoting child marriage. According to an MJACR official, the ministry also banned an unknown number of religious institutions with “obscure purposes” in Inhambane Province in the southern part of the country.

Religious leaders played a prominent role in October municipal elections held in 65 localities across the country, including by sending representatives to polling sites as observers and issuing statements calling for free and fair voting, tabulation of results, and judicial review of legal challenges. The chairman of the National Elections Commission has traditionally been a prominent religious figure, and Anglican Bishop Carlos Matsinhe served as chair during the elections, leading a commission with representatives nominated by the Frelimo and Renamo political parties and civil society organizations. Following the elections, the Anglican Council of Mozambique issued a pastoral letter criticizing failings in election management – pointing specifically to Bishop Matsinhe – and interference by those without an official role to play in the electoral process.

The Cabo Delgado provincial and district affiliates of CISLAMMO engaged with government officials to act as a liaison between security forces and Muslim communities affected by the insurgency and to ensure language or cultural

barriers were not obstacles to conversations about security concerns or the needs of displaced residents.

The government worked with religious organizations via the Interfaith Platform for Health Communication to promote vaccination and other public health campaigns throughout the country via home visits, sermons, community radio, and display and dissemination of communication material such as educational posters. The government also conducted public health outreach with practitioners of traditional medicine, syncretic churches, and evangelical congregations. The Christian Council of Mozambique (CCM) and CISLAMMO managed “peace clubs” to support the joint effort by the government and the Renamo opposition party to complete the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of former Renamo combatants from the civil war that ended in 1992. The disarmament and demobilization aspects of the DDR process concluded in June, although President Filipe Nyusi promised that the dialogue for peace would continue as reintegration took priority.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In September, ISIS-M attacked a village in Cabo Delgado’s Mocimboa da Praia District, claiming to have targeted and killed at least 11 Christians. Media quoted survivors as saying the group separated Christian and Muslim villagers based on their names before opening fire on those they supposed to be Christian.

ISIS-M propaganda said the group targeted Christians and Christian villages, although in practice it often made little distinction among its victims. Media reported Muslim communities were also among the targets of often indiscriminate ISIS-M attacks in rural areas.

Religious leaders continued to express concern about the humanitarian crisis in Cabo Delgado, with some emphasizing the role of congregations in humanitarian response.

Prominent Muslim leaders remained outspoken against the strict version of Islam promoted by ISIS-M, stating that it was not in line with the country's traditional Islamic culture and practice, and continued to condemn insurgent attacks on civilians and security forces.

NGOs, news media outlets, analysts, and human rights organizations stated that attributing religious motives alone to terrorists operating in Cabo Delgado risked exacerbating existing socioeconomic grievances among historically marginalized majority-Muslim populations and promoted misconceptions among security forces that hindered their relationships with local communities.

The Islamic Council and Catholic Church, among other religious organizations, regularly interacted in the three northern provinces to promote interfaith harmony through joint community outreach initiatives and consistent messaging. In January, the Catholic Bishop of Pemba, Antonio Juliasse noted periodic meetings with Muslim leaders and said there was healthy coexistence between Christians and Muslims, characterized by mutual assistance.

Civil society and religious organizations conducted outreach to promote religious tolerance during the year. An interfaith network, including CISLAMO and the Catholic Church, coordinated some assistance to internally displaced persons in Nampula and Cabo Delgado who were affected by terrorism in Cabo Delgado. The Islamic Council raised funds to support

those individuals. Interfaith leaders also continued efforts to provide food to needy families.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador engaged senior officials on the violence in the northern region. He noted the continued need for the government to engage the religious community to effectively address the violence.

Through a series of outreach initiatives, the Ambassador and embassy officers discussed the importance of religious tolerance to promote peace and security with leaders and representatives of religious groups and local civil society organizations. Official U.S. government visitors routinely engaged with religious leaders in the capital and in other areas of the country. As part of the Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, the embassy administered a \$291,000 grant to CISLAMO in a program comanaged with the CCM to bolster and sustain peace clubs established under the DDR process and visited these clubs throughout the year.

During the year, the embassy implemented three interfaith outreach-focused programs. One program aimed to help religious and civil society leaders develop and amplify credible messages for underserved populations on a range of public health issues, including disease prevention and treatment, nutrition, and maternal and child health. A second program supported faith-based interventions to advance the national HIV and tuberculosis response, including by offering technical assistance to the establishment of provincial-level committees affiliated with the interfaith National Religious Congregations Committee. A third program enabled Muslim and Christian leaders in Cabo Delgado to provide peacebuilding and social cohesion activities for vulnerable youth to counter the influence of violent extremism, especially as it related to religion. The embassy also

concluded two multiyear programs aimed at helping religious and civil society leaders counter extremist propaganda, including that related to religion, and improve community engagement.

The embassy again engaged in outreach on social media during Ramadan and Eid al-Adha. The Ambassador conducted an interview with *Voz do Islam* (*Voice of Islam*), a widely broadcast radio station, in which he highlighted what he stated were the shared values of the United States and the Muslim community in Mozambique. The embassy also sponsored three iftars – one in the Maputo suburb of Matola and two in northern Nampula Province – that promoted religious tolerance and engaged Muslim community leaders at the local level about key issues, including the impact of the Cabo Delgado crisis on the Muslim community.