

TANZANIA 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitutions of the union government (United Republic of Tanzania) and of the semiautonomous government in Zanzibar both provide for equality regardless of religion, prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion, and stipulate freedom of conscience or faith and choice in matters of religion, including the freedom to change one's faith. The union government constitution allows these rights to be limited by law for purposes such as protecting the rights of others; promoting the national interest; and safeguarding defense, safety, peace, morality, and health. The Zanzibar constitution allows rights to be limited by law if such a limitation is "necessary and agreeable in the democratic system" and does not limit the "foundation" of a constitutional right or bring "more harm" to society.

In September, Sheikh Issa Ponda, a Muslim cleric based in Dar es Salaam, posted data on social media on imprisoned Muslim sheikhs, including six sheikhs serving 50-year sentences in Dodoma prison after being found guilty of treason. In February, Ponda also stated that at least 201 Muslim terror suspects were being held at various prisons across the country. In March, the Registrar of Societies under the Ministry of Home Affairs suspended the operation of Dar es Salaam-based Spirit World Ministry Church, led by Bishop Ceaser Masisi, after a video clip of Masisi affirming the right to engage in same-sex relationships went viral on social media. On June 7, police in Mwanza Region arrested Pastor Herman Magigita, leader of the Neno Church (Word Church), on charges of operating without legal registration and preaching false doctrine to his church members. At year's

end, six clerics who were arrested on terrorism charges in 2013 along with 34 other members of the Association for Islamic Mobilization and Propagation (UAMSHO), a group advocating Zanzibar's full autonomy, remained in prison.

On March 1, Zanzibar President Hussein Ali Mwinyi publicly encouraged religious leaders to play a role in preventing what he termed unnecessary social conflicts and crimes associated with immoral behavior. On April 23, in an Eid al Fitr message delivered in Dar es Salaam, President Samia Suluhu Hassan urged Tanzanians to use religious teachings to maintain national unity, peace, and tranquility for the country's development to continue to prosper.

In early October, a mob in the Kazuramimba area of Kigoma Region reportedly dragged several persons they alleged were witches out of their homes and shaved their heads and beat them. While witchcraft practices are illegal under the law, sources stated that allegations of witchcraft were common in rural areas where traditional healing is often practiced.

Throughout the year, the U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials met with officials from the National Assembly, the Ministry of Constitutional Affairs and Justice, and the Commission on Human Rights and Good Governance (CHRAGG). The Ambassador regularly encouraged government officials to include religious leaders in political processes, including discussions regarding constitutional and election reform. In March, the Ambassador held an interfaith event with religious leaders, government officials, and civil society leaders to highlight religious freedom and tolerance as well as ongoing interfaith cooperation on issues of faith, development, and human rights. He also held separate meetings during the year with a variety of religious leaders and organizations, including the

Grand Mufti of Zanzibar, the National Muslim Council of Tanzania (BAKWATA), the Chief Mufti of Mainland Tanzania, bishops from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania, Catholic leaders, and leaders of the Christian Council of Tanzania.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 65.6 million (midyear 2023). A 2020 Pew Forum survey estimates approximately 63 percent of the population identifies as Christian, 34 percent as Muslim, and the remainder are practitioners of other religions or are unaffiliated. According to the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Christians are approximately evenly divided between Roman Catholics and Protestant denominations. Other local observers believe that Roman Catholics constitute a majority of Christians, with Lutherans as the second largest denomination. Additional Christian groups include Anglicans, Pentecostal Christian groups, Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses. A majority of Muslims are Sunni, although significant minority communities exist, including Ismaili, Twelver Shia, Ahmadi, and Ibadi Muslims. On the mainland, large Muslim communities are concentrated in coastal areas, with some Muslim minorities located inland in urban areas. Other religious groups include Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, animists, and those who did not express a religious preference. A separate 2010 Pew Forum report estimates more than half the population practices elements of African traditional religions.

Zanzibar's 1.5 million residents are 99 percent Muslim, according to a U.S. government estimate. According to a 2012 Pew Forum report, two-thirds are Sunni. The remainder consists of several Shia groups, mostly of Asian descent.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitutions of the union government (United Republic of Tanzania) and of the semiautonomous government in Zanzibar both provide for equality regardless of religion, prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion, and stipulate freedom of conscience or faith and choice in matters of religion, including the freedom to change one's faith. The union government constitution allows these rights to be limited by law for purposes such as protecting the rights of others; promoting the national interest; and safeguarding defense, safety, peace, morality, and health. The Zanzibar constitution allows rights to be limited by law if such a limitation is "necessary and agreeable in the democratic system" and does not limit the "foundation" of a constitutional right or bring "more harm" to society.

Since independence and by tradition, the country has been governed by alternating Christian and Muslim presidents who have, by tradition, appointed a prime minister from the other religious group with the endorsement of parliament.

The law prohibits religious groups from registering as political parties. To register as a political party, a group may not use religion as a basis for approving membership, nor may it follow a policy of promoting a religion.

The national code contains blasphemy laws, which prohibit insulting religion or "wounding religious feelings" and outlines misdemeanor offenses carrying a penalty of one-year imprisonment. The misdemeanors include

destroying, damaging, or defiling any place of worship or object held sacred with the intention of insulting the religion of any class of persons; trespassing on a place of worship with the intention of wounding religious feelings; taking any action or making any statement with the intent of insulting a place of worship, the performance of religious worship, or the religious beliefs of another person.

Religious groups must register with the Registrar of Societies at the Ministry of Home Affairs on the mainland and with the Office of the Registrar General on Zanzibar. Registration is required by law on both the mainland and in Zanzibar. The fines for offenses under the Societies Act, including operating without registration, range from one million to 10 million shillings (\$400 to \$4,000).

To register, a religious group must provide the names of at least 10 members, a written constitution, resumes of its leaders, and a letter of recommendation from the district commissioner. Such groups may then list individual congregations, which do not need separate registration. Muslim groups registering on the mainland must provide a letter of approval from BAKWATA. Muslim groups registering in Zanzibar must provide a letter of approval from the Mufti, the government's official liaison to the Muslim community. Christian groups in Zanzibar may register directly with the registrar general.

On the mainland, secular laws govern Christians and Muslims in both criminal and civil cases. In family-related cases involving inheritance, marriage, divorce, and the adoption of minors, the law also recognizes customary practices, which could include religious practices. In such cases, some Muslims choose to consult religious leaders in lieu of bringing a court case.

Zanzibar, while also subject to the union constitution, is a semiautonomous region with its own President, court system, and legislature. Muslims in Zanzibar have the option of bringing cases to a civil or *qadi* (Islamic court or judge) court for matters of divorce, child custody, inheritance, and other issues covered by Islamic law. All cases tried in Zanzibar courts, except those involving Zanzibari constitutional matters and sharia, may be appealed to the Union Court of Appeals on the mainland. Decisions of Zanzibar's *qadi* courts may be appealed to a special court consisting of the Zanzibar chief justice and five other sheikhs. The President of Zanzibar appoints the chief *qadi*, who oversees the *qadi* courts and is recognized as the senior Islamic scholar responsible for interpreting the Quran. There are no *qadi* courts on the mainland.

On the mainland, BAKWATA elects the Mufti. On Zanzibar, the president of Zanzibar appoints the Mufti, who serves as a leader of the Muslim community and as a public servant assisting with local governmental affairs. The Mufti of Zanzibar nominally approves all Islamic activities and supervises all mosques. The Mufti also approves religious lectures by visiting Islamic clergy and supervises the importation of Islamic literature from outside Zanzibar.

Public schools may teach religion, but it is not a part of the official national curriculum. School administrations or parent-teacher associations must approve such classes, which are taught on an occasional basis by parents or volunteers. Public school registration forms must specify a child's religious affiliation so that administrators can assign students to the appropriate religion class if one is offered. Students may also choose to opt out of religious studies. Private schools may teach religion, although it is not required, and these schools generally follow the national educational

curriculum unless they receive a waiver from the Ministry of Education for a separate curriculum. In public schools, students are allowed to wear the hijab but not the niqab.

The government does not designate religious affiliation on passports or records of vital statistics. Police reports must state religious affiliation if an individual will be required to provide sworn testimony. Applications for medical care must specify religious affiliation so that any specific religious customs may be observed. The law requires the government to record the religious affiliation of every prisoner and to provide facilities for worship for prisoners.

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

Government Practices

At year's end, six Muslim clerics – Nassoro Said Hemed, Hamad Omary Hamis Juma, Hamis Haji Machano, Mohamed Ally Omar, Khatibu Hassan Khamis, and Khamis Miraji Hussein – who were among the 40 UAMSHO members arrested in 2013 on terrorism charges, remained in prison. In 2021, the director of public prosecution dropped charges against the other 34 members of UAMSHO who had been arrested.

On September 6, Sheikh Ponda Issa Ponda, shared a social media post with data on imprisoned sheikhs. In his post, Ponda reported that six Muslim sheikhs were serving 50-year sentences in Dodoma prison after being found guilty of committing treason. He also reported on 12 sheikhs who had been imprisoned in Arusha for nine years on terrorism-related offenses. In December, six of the 12 were sentenced to death on the terrorism charges,

and two were released. According to local nongovernmental organizations the government has not generally carried out death sentences. Ponda further reported 10 sheikhs in Tanga who were found guilty of terrorism offenses and sentenced to death. In February, Ponda had reported that at least 201 Muslim terror suspects were being held at various prisons across the country.

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs budget speech, 17 religious communities in the Mtwara and Lindi Regions were working with security and safety agencies to comply with a 2022 directive requiring all faith-based organizations, such as church-affiliated groups, to reregister for a five-year registration validity instead of the permanent validity that was previously in force. There were no reports of religious associations or faith-based organizations being deregistered under this directive during the year.

According to human rights organizations, the government forcibly evicted Maasai communities from their ancestral land in the north of the country, which sources stated was a spiritual and cultural site for the Maasai. Maasai representatives reported that ongoing government-led forced evictions of Maasai pastoralists from their ancestral land in Loliondo and Ngorongoro continued to interfere with the Maasai's ability to practice their religion, which is intrinsically connected to this land. They also reported continued loss of access to significant sites of worship, including sacred trees, craters, hills, and other sites that the Maasai use for ceremonies and prayer. This includes loss of access to Ol Doinyo Lengai, or "Mountain of God," an active volcano which Maasai sources stated was where the Maasai believe their god lives, and where they conduct sacrifices during times of scarcity. According to the Maasai representatives, the government also continued to seize Maasai cattle, which they stated were spiritually significant and used in

important religious traditions and ceremonies. The Maasai representatives also reported that several sacred objects were missing.

There were several incidents involving traditional healers during the year. Police arrested Sabihi Mpando in Chipuputa, Mtwara Region on suspicion of abusing a 17-year-old male on the night of February 23. Acting Police Commander Hamis Ramadhani said the victim was tricked by the traditional healer. On October 5, an unnamed traditional healer was arrested for suspected involvement in the deaths of two 17-year-old girls. The twin girls, residents of Bubale village in Simiyu Region, died after receiving medicine from a traditional healer. The district commissioner warned traditional healers against acts that could result in the injury or death of those seeking treatment, urging the community to be careful with the treatment they receive.

On November 30, Zanzibar adopted a revised Qadi Court Act, repealing a 2017 law. The revised law included changes intended to address the law's conflict with civil courts, primarily through clarification of the Qadi Court's jurisdiction. The act details circumstances and subjects under which the Qadi Court has original jurisdiction, including division of joint matrimonial assets. Dr. Mzuri Issa, head of the Tanzania Media Women's Association in Zanzibar, expressed support for the reform, stating it expanded the administration of justice and provided a mechanism to resolve conflicts within the established civil court system.

On June 7, police in Mwanza Region arrested Pastor Herman Magigita, leader of the Neno church (Word church), on charges of operating without legal registration and preaching false doctrine to his church members. Magigita reportedly advocated faith healing through attendance at church prayers instead of going to the hospital. Community members from Chema

village reported the pastor to police. The church was closed as of June 9 and remained closed at year's end, and an investigation was proceeding.

On April 23, in an Eid al Fitr message delivered in Dar es Salaam, President Samia Suluhu Hassan urged Tanzanians to use religious teachings to maintain national unity, peace, and tranquility for the country to continue prospering in all aspects of development. She also called on parents to take a lead role in providing proper guidance to their children to address issues of morality in society.

According to some religious leaders, the government penalized prominent religious leaders for expressing views it deemed political and inflammatory. In March, the Registrar of Societies under the Ministry of Home Affairs suspended the operation of Dar es Salaam-based Spirit World Ministry Church led by Bishop Ceaser Masisi after a video clip of the bishop affirming the right to engage in same-sex relationships went viral on social media. On March 9, Masisi received an official suspension letter issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs. He was subsequently arrested, questioned, and later released on bail. On March 12, Masisi held a press conference and denied the charges, stating that unknown persons took video clips of his preaching out of context and posted them online. He requested that responsible authorities, including the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority, take legal action against all those who shared the video clips on social media.

On July 5, Minister of Home Affairs Hamad Masauni gave a statement in Dodoma during an official meeting with the leaders of religious associations and councils, saying that some operated illegally and were not registered. He said that the government would act against all religious institutions that failed to comply with the law, including "the institution operated by Diana

Bundala the self-proclaimed king,” referring to the Mfalme Zumaridi Church led by Bundala, which remained unregistered despite having more than 500 members, as well as other emerging churches. In January, Bundala was sentenced to one year in prison on charges related to human trafficking.

On September 29, local media reported that Pastor Mbarikiwa Mwakipesile was sentenced to three years and 14 days in prison after being found guilty by the Mbeya magistrate court of operating a church without registration. Public comments on social media alleged that he was imprisoned for his critical statements regarding an intergovernmental agreement with Dubai for Dubai Ports World (DP World) to manage port development projects in Dar es Salaam and elsewhere in the country rather than for the operation of his church.

On August 19, the Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC), representing the Catholic Church, released a statement entitled “The Voice of the People, Voice of God” that criticized the agreement with DP World. In response, former President Jakaya Kikwete warned against mixing religion with politics, saying it risked disrupting peace and harmony in the country. In a speech at the opening ceremony of a Seventh Day Adventist Church, Kikwete warned against individuals or groups attempting to merge religious beliefs with political agendas. An article in *The Citizen* newspaper, however, stated that the “TEC has a responsibility to speak out on issues that safeguard the interests of their followers and the nation. That right cannot be taken from them on account of their faith.”

On April 3, Prime Minister Kassim Majaliwa urged faith leaders to condemn gender-based violence, while also reiterating a call for them to put more emphasis on reshaping the public in responding to what he considered widespread issues of morality in the society. Majaliwa made the call while

speaking to leaders and believers who attended the national competition for recitation and memorization of the Quran, held in Dar es Salaam. He said the country was “dealing with the issue of moral deterioration” and he said he believed the country was undergoing a wave of behavior contrary to Tanzanian values and traditions.

On March 1, Zanzibar President Mwinyi publicly encouraged religious leaders to play a role in preventing unnecessary social conflicts and crimes associated with immoral behavior. He said political and religious differences should not in any way divide Tanzanians, stating that religious organizations had a duty to help the government raise public awareness regarding observing religious teachings, obeying the laws, and promoting good behavior among young people to develop responsible citizens.

On April 11, Zanzibar President Mwinyi called for imams to continue enhancing efforts to battle what he called escalating moral decay in society. Mwinyi said corruption and fraud, social injustice, gender-based violence, increased use of illicit drugs, and the theft of agricultural products and livestock were examples of immoral behavior in society. He also urged the community to use the Quran in schools and other classes for children to shape them, adding, “Good education begins from home and faith classes and in conventional schools.”

On February 7, Zanzibar Minister of State, Constitution, Law, Labor and Good Governance Haroun Ali Suleiman said the Saudi government would open a special bank account to be used to facilitate travel of Zanzibar Muslims to Mecca for annual pilgrimages. The announcement followed Zanzibar President Mwinyi’s statement in 2022 that Zanzibar would enhance government support for Muslims who wanted to perform the Hajj. For the year, Saudi Arabia allocated 25,000 slots for pilgrims from Tanzania and

3,170 made the pilgrimage, more than half from Zanzibar, compared with 1,600 from the mainland and 1,100 from Zanzibar in 2022.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

During the weekend of October 7-8, a group of local residents in the Kazuramimba area of Kigoma Region reportedly dragged several persons they alleged were witches out of their homes, and then shaved their heads and beat them. The mob attacked police attempting to intervene, and police fired on the crowd in response, resulting in one death. Witchcraft practices are illegal under the law, but allegations of witchcraft remained common in rural areas where traditional healing is often practiced. Sources stated that the motives were unclear in the case, but that previous incidents of this type were associated with socioeconomic tensions.

Debate continued during the year regarding changes to the Law of Marriage Act to prohibit marriage under the age of 18. Judge Moses Mzuna of the High Court of Tanzania directed the attorney general (AG) to comply with court decisions declaring provisions in the Law of Marriage Act unconstitutional. The decision required the AG to comply within six months of July 4, 2023. As of year's end, the AG had not yet taken action.

According to Release International, a UK-based charity that supports threatened Christians around the world, Christians in Zanzibar faced significant opposition, ranging from family pressure to the burning of church buildings.

On March 3, the Tanzania Peace and Reconciliation Committee, which includes a number of religious leaders and is chaired by Sheikh Alhad Mussa

Salum, held a conference commemorating the committee's seventh anniversary. The focus of the conference was "how best to cooperate with the government to ensure that acts of violence against women and children as well as senseless killing are stopped."

On September 6, a video of a Muslim man complaining about Christians making "noises" during the Islamic call for prayer went viral in Zanzibar. According to various sources, the video stoked anger among Muslims already frustrated with the political situation in Zanzibar, with some commenters stating that authorities were giving Christians preferential treatment.

On February 22, the TEC released a 33-page message for Lent that stressed the importance of human dignity and warned against secularism. The message emphasized the importance of having faith in God for physical, spiritual, mental, psychological, and pastoral formation.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On March 15, the Ambassador held an interfaith event with religious leaders, government officials, and civil society leaders to highlight religious freedom and tolerance as well as ongoing interfaith cooperation on issues of faith, development, human rights. He also held separate meetings during the year with a variety of religious leaders and organizations, including the Grand Mufti of Zanzibar, BAKWATA, the Chief Mufti of Mainland Tanzania, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania Bishop Fredrick Shoo and Bishop Benson Bagonza, Catholic Cardinal Protase Rugambwa and Father Charles Kitima, and the Christian Council of Tanzania to support and encourage religious freedom and tolerance.

In his remarks to the TEC in October, the Ambassador highlighted the importance of interfaith dialogue in the political process and encouraged the faith community to serve as an advocate for disadvantaged groups in Tanzania. In private meetings with religious leaders, embassy officials emphasized support for efforts to promote reconciliation and religious tolerance.