

Document #2011109

USDOS – US Department of State

## 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Mozambique

### Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right to practice or not to practice religion freely and prohibits discrimination based on religion. 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. The constitution prohibits faith-based political parties and the use of religious symbols in politics. Religious groups have the right to organize, worship, and operate schools. In the northernmost province of Cabo Delgado, the government responded to attacks on security forces and killings and beheadings of civilians by a group sometimes referred to as Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamaah and which was termed jihadist by the government and the media, with significant security force operations and the arrest of hundreds of suspected jihadists. These operations were characterized by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and news media as sometimes heavy-handed and contributing to a “growing cycle of grievance and revenge” between militant Islamists and security forces. The government reopened all seven mosques it ordered closed in 2017. The Greek Orthodox Church reported no progress in its efforts to regain property the government seized following independence.

Religious leaders at the national and provincial level called for religious tolerance and condemned the use of religion to condone violence. For example, Muslim leaders joined former liberation fighters condemning those who allegedly use religion for illicit and criminal purposes.

The Ambassador discussed the challenge and importance of sustaining the country's tradition of religious tolerance, especially in light of the attacks in the northern region, with President Filipe Nyusi, the minister of justice, and other high-level contacts. The Ambassador hosted an iftar at the Anwaril Mosque during which religious tolerance was discussed with members of Islamic civil society organizations and religious leaders. Embassy representatives discussed the importance of religious tolerance with Catholic Church representatives and Islamic religious leaders in the provinces of Cabo Delgado, Sofala, and Nampula.

### Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 27.2 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the U.S. government, 28 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 18 percent Muslim (mostly Sunni), 15 percent Zionist Christian, 12 percent Protestant (includes Pentecostal/Evangelical, 10 percent), and 7 percent other religious groups, including the Baha'i Faith, Judaism, and Hinduism. Approximately 18 percent do not profess any religion or belief. According to Christian and Muslim religious leaders, a significant portion of the population adheres to syncretic indigenous religious beliefs, characterized by a combination of African traditional practices and aspects of either Christianity or Islam, a category not included in government estimates. Muslim leaders state their community accounts for 25-30 percent of the total population, a statistic frequently reported in the press.

A census conducted in August 2017 included questions on religious affiliation. The full census results were scheduled to be released in spring 2019.

## 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 individuals may be deprived of their 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. It 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. Under the law, “religious organizations” are charities or humanitarian organizations, whereas “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 the local leaders, and submitting 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.

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

Violent attacks by Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamaah continued throughout the year in northern Cabo Delgado Province. The group, which claimed ties to the al-Shabaab terrorist group and was characterized by the government and the media as jihadist, was composed primarily of Muslims who followed what observers said was a strict version of Islam. The attacks, which began in October 2017, included killings of security force members and beheading of civilians. Significant security force operations to counter these attacks were at times heavy-handed, according to NGOs and news media, which said they focused primarily on Muslims following a strict interpretation of Islam and contributed to a “growing cycle of grievance and revenge” between militant Islamists and security forces. Several organizations reported men, women, and children being arbitrarily detained based on appearing to be Muslim. The government charged the detainees with crimes including first-degree murder, use of banned weapons, membership in a criminal association, and instigating collective disobedience against public order. The government continued to state publicly that security forces had the situation under control.

In response to the attacks, government officials stated they arrested more than 280 attackers, whom they termed suspected jihadists, and at year’s end were prosecuting 189 of those individuals, including 152 Mozambicans, 26 Tanzanians, and three Somali nationals. Among the individuals arrested were Muslim religious leaders. Representatives of international organizations with access to the region stated they believed the number of individuals arrested was higher than that reported by the government.

Human rights organizations stated that the government also responded by implementing policies that they said inhibited reliable reporting in the northern region. Reporting on the attacks remained limited and was often characterized as unreliable due to a strong security force presence and what journalists termed a government-imposed media blackout in the region.

In May the government reported reopening all of the seven mosques it ordered closed in 2017 after repeated attacks on police stations and hospital units by armed men who had alleged links to persons termed Islamists. According to Provincial Director of Justice Alvaro Junior, the government decided to destroy seven other mosques due to their links to radicalism.

The Ministry of Justice registered 32 new religious groups and six new religious organizations during the year. There were a total of 913 religious groups and 232 religious organizations registered. There were no reports of difficulty with religious groups registering.

The Greek Orthodox Church continued to report no progress in its efforts to obtain the return of the Ateneu (Athenaeum), a church property in central Maputo seized by the government after independence and renamed the Palacio dos Casamentos (Wedding Palace).

### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The leader of a Maputo mosque, Sheikh Saide Habibe, condemned the attacks in the northern part of the country, stating that the Islam preached by Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamaah was not in line with traditional Muslim values. Habibe also coauthored, with prominent civil society members, a yet-to-be-released study on the nature of what was termed the extremist threat in the north of the country. In a preview the study identified the group’s membership as consisting mainly of disenfranchised youth from the overwhelmingly Muslim M’wani ethnic group that believed itself unjustly dominated by the overwhelmingly Christian Makonde ethnic group, which was perceived as constituting much of the ruling and economic elite in the province and in their districts.

In January the Mozambican Council of Religions facilitated a National Summit on Peace and Reconciliation to find solutions to the conflict that followed the 2014 general election. The summit was widely attended by religious and political leaders from throughout the country, as well as the international community.

Civil society and religious organizations conducted outreach to promote religious tolerance during the year. During Eid al-Adha, Muslim leaders in Nampula gathered former liberation fighters, civil society groups, and politicians at a rally condemning those who allegedly use religion for illicit and criminal purposes. Muslim leaders and organizations in Maputo worked with the government to counter violence in the northern part of the country.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In light of the violence in the northern region, the Ambassador directly engaged President Nyusi and the minister of justice on the continued importance of the country’s history of religious tolerance. Through a series of outreach initiatives, the Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed the importance of religious tolerance to promote peace and security with representatives of different religious denominations. This included an iftar hosted by the Ambassador at the Anwaril Mosque attended by members representing Islamic civil society and religious organizations active in the country. Embassy officials also discussed the status of religious freedom and expressed U.S. government support for this fundamental right with Catholic and Muslim leaders in Cabo Delgado, Sofala, and Nampula Provinces.

**ecoi.net summary:**

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2018)

**Country:**

Mozambique

**Source:**USDOS – US Department of State (/en/source/11558.html)**Original link:**<https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/mozambique/> (<https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/mozambique/>)**Document type:**

Periodical Report

**Language:**

English

**Published:**

21 June 2019

**Document ID:**

2011109

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

