

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Liberia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides for the separation of religion and state and stipulates all persons are entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, except as required by law to protect public safety, order, health, morals, or the rights of others. It also provides for equal protection under the law and prohibits religious tests for office and the establishment of a state religion.

During the lead-up to October national elections, several political candidates used churches to deliver political campaign speeches, criticize opponents and respond to critics, express their opinions on the national observance of Islamic holidays, and debate the country's status as a secular state. Grand Mufti of the Fatwa Council of Liberia Sheikh Abubakar Sumaworo called for unity and restraint among Muslims in response to public calls for restricting the observance of Islamic holidays and for returning the country to an official Christian state. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'i Faith worked with the Center for National Documents and Records Agency on government recognition of Baha'i marriages.

The Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly established a committee to explore joining the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL), although the latter organization's constitution restricts membership to the Liberia Council of Churches and the National Muslim Council of Liberia. Several religious organizations continued to protest the forced initiation and occasional abduction of their members by leaders of the traditional secret societies in rural communities. In Grand Gedeh County, the Baha'i community came to an agreement with traditional leaders to have Baha'is accused of witchcraft turned over to the Baha'i community for investigation rather than to traditional authorities.

U.S. embassy officers regularly met with a range of civil society and religious figures to discuss tolerance and emphasize peaceful reconciliation practices as the country continued to cope with the lingering effects of its civil wars.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 5.3 million (midyear 2023). According to the 2022 National Population and Housing Census, the population is 84.9 percent Christian, 12 percent Muslim, 2.6 percent persons who claim no religion, 0.5 percent adherents of traditional indigenous religious beliefs, and less than 0.1 percent members of other religious groups, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and Sikhs. Muslim organizations state that Muslims constitute up to 20 percent of the population.

Christian denominations include the African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Baptist, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Episcopal, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, United Methodist, and a variety of Pentecostal churches. According to the Set Free Alliance, a U.S.-based Christian outreach and humanitarian aid organization, the largest Christian denomination is the United Methodist Church. Most Muslims are Sunni. There are also small Shia and Ahmadi communities. Many members of

religious groups also incorporate elements of Indigenous traditional beliefs and customs into their religious practices.

Christians reside across the country. Muslims belonging to the Mandingo and Fula ethnic groups also live throughout the country, while Muslims of the Vai ethnic group live predominantly in Grand Cape Mount County in the west. The traditional Poro (for males) and Sande (for females) societies – often referred to as “bush schools” or secret societies – combine traditional religious and cultural practices and are present in the northern, western, and central regions of the country. Other traditional cultural and religious societies, including the Kui Society and the Bodio (priests of the Glebo people), reside primarily in the southeast.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution provides for the separation of religion and state and stipulates all persons are entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It states no one shall be hindered in the exercise of these rights except as required by law to protect public safety, order, health, morals, or the rights of others. It provides for equal protection under the law and prohibits political parties that exclude citizens from membership based on religious affiliation. It also states no religious group shall have exclusive privileges or preferences and that the country shall establish no state religion.

The government requires all religious groups, except for Indigenous ones that generally operate under customary law, to register their articles of incorporation and their organizations’ statements of purpose.

Local religious organizations register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and pay a one-time fee of 7,500 Liberian dollars (L\$) (\$40) to file their articles of incorporation and an annual fee of L\$3,500 (\$19) for registration. Foreign religious organizations pay L\$78,000 (\$410) for registration annually and a one-time fee of L\$96,000 (\$510) to file their articles of incorporation. Religious organizations also pay L\$1,500 to L\$2,000 (\$8 to \$11) to notarize articles of incorporation to be filed with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and an additional L\$1,500 (\$8) to receive a registered copy of the articles. The Ministry of Finance and Development Planning issues proof of accreditation for the articles of incorporation. There is also an option of completing the same process at the Liberia Business Registry. Some religious organizations are eligible to register at the business entity level, in compliance with a government regulation.

Registered religious organizations, including missionary programs, religious charities, and religious groups, receive income tax exemptions and duty-free privileges on goods brought into the country, privileges not afforded to unregistered groups. Registered groups may be sued as a single entity separately from any lawsuits brought against individual owners.

The law requires high-level government officials to take an oath ending with the phrase, “So help me God” when assuming office. On those occasions, it is customary for Christians to kiss the Bible, and Muslims the Quran.

Public schools offer nonsectarian religious and moral education as part of the standard curriculum, which includes an overview and history of various religious traditions and an emphasis on moral values.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

During the lead-up to October national elections, several political candidates used churches to deliver political campaign speeches, criticize opponents and respond to critics, express their opinions on the national observance of Islamic holidays, and debate the country's status as a secular state. For example, press reports noted that incumbent President George Weah frequently made political statements from the pulpit in his church during the presidential election campaign, including criticism of political opponents such as Senator Prince Yormie Johnson. Johnson, for his part, leveled criticisms at President Weah during services at his own church.

In a pre-election interview in the *New Dawn* newspaper, Tiawan Gongloe, presidential candidate of the Liberian People's Party, said that, because Liberia was the only country in West Africa that did not have an Islamic holiday, there was a need to strengthen religious tolerance by ensuring that Eid al-Fitr, marking the end of Ramadan, became a national holiday.

In the lead-up to national elections, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Liberia appealed to political parties and candidates to do their utmost to advance peace and ensure their supporters conducted themselves appropriately.

Muslim religious leaders called for their adherents to remain calm despite campaign promises by some politicians to make the country a Christian state. Muslim religious leaders also urged their adherents not to vote for a candidate solely on the basis of pledges to mark Islamic observances as national holidays, if elected. In April, leader of the Liberia Restoration Party Allen Roosevelt Brown promised to "redeem" the country's Christian faith by returning the country to a Christian state using the "trenches of politics." While addressing reporters in Monrovia, Brown stated the country was established "on the fundamental pillar of faith," although it was made a secular state by the 1986 constitution.

Grand Mufti of the Fatwa Council of Liberia Sheikh Sumaworo called for unity and restraint among Muslims during his Eid al-Fitr message in April amid calls for official recognition of Islamic holidays or for a return of the country to a Christian state. Sumaworo exhorted followers to denounce those who "sow seeds of disunity" among Muslims.

During the July 21 Thanksgiving and Intercessory Service held at the Black Jina Central Mosque in Jacob Town, President Weah raised religious tolerance as an essential element to maintaining peace and harmony in the country. He appealed to Liberians to demonstrate maturity during the October 10 elections by voting peacefully.

The National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is reported warming relations with the government and during the year, commenced preliminary exploratory talks with the Center for National Documents and Records Agency (CNDRA) to recognize and conduct Baha'i marriages. CNDRA had officers stationed at its central office to conduct weddings and award marriage certificates for Christians and Muslims and suggested stationing a Baha'i representative at the CNDRA to conduct weddings and process marriage certificates for Baha'is.

Human rights organizations continued to call upon the government to intervene in and investigate cases of persons accused of witchcraft being injured or killed as the result of exorcisms and trials by ordeal.

According to radio reports, on April 20, President Weah granted all Muslims working in the public sector a day off to observe Eid al-Fitr. In 2022, the National Imam Council of Liberia had urged municipal authorities in Monrovia to grant a holiday on Eid al-Fitr for Muslim workers in the city; Weah's directive covered the whole country.

In practice and by tradition, Christian chaplains led a Christian invocation before the start of public events or official government business, with an Islamic prayer at the end. With the exception of the Supreme Court, the armed forces, and the Office of the President, few, if any, institutions had Muslim chaplains to lead a benediction.

Muslims reported the government provided disproportionately more subsidies to schools affiliated with Christian organizations than to those affiliated with Muslim organizations, although the government stated it provided subsidies to schools based on need, through an application process.

Religious leaders continued to recommend that the government engage religious communities in proactive dialogue on social and other issues, such as political violence and disputes and economic development, rather than calling upon religious organizations as mediators only after problems developed. An example of this was an April 26 appeal by the Liberia Council of Churches for the government to address growing insecurity following an armed robbery and killing in Monrovia. On May 12, the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission held an advocacy workshop for interfaith leaders on corruption, transparency, and accountability in which participants said that a lack of basic social services and essential medicines in rural areas contributed to increased urban migration and crime. Religious leaders continued to express willingness to mediate in conflict situations as an extension of their proactive dialogue on social issues.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On December 18, the *FrontPage Africa* newspaper reported it had obtained an audio recording in which Grand Gedeh County Senator-elect Thomas Yaya-Namely intimidated a woman who allegedly confessed to witchcraft and a role in the death of Representative Madison Gwion after the woman underwent “sassywood,” an outlawed (but generally not prosecuted) practice involving trial by ordeal. Yaya-Namely expressed his belief in the woman’s involvement in witchcraft and said that she did not act alone. On December 5, supporters of Gwion damaged properties belonging to Senator Zoe Pennue, whom they accused of causing Gwion’s death through “traditional means” (witchcraft). The violence caused the closure of businesses and schools, and the Armed Forces of Liberia intervened to restore order.

Several religious organizations, including Christian and Muslim groups, and the National Spiritual Assembly of Baha’is in Liberia, continued to voice alarm over the forced initiation of their members by leaders of traditional Poro and Sande secret societies. During the year, the assembly met with the paramount chief of a clan in Grand Gedeh County, who apologized for the forced initiations in 2021 and 2022, and also agreed to hand over Baha’is accused of witchcraft to their own religious authorities instead of subjecting them to traditional practices in the community, which included alleged physical abuse.

During the year, the National Spiritual Assembly of Baha’is in Liberia established an external affairs committee to explore joining the IRCL, although the IRCL’s constitution restricts membership to the Liberia Council of Churches and the National Muslim Council of Liberia.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officers regularly met with a wide range of civil society and religious figures, including representatives of Christian, Muslim, Baha’i, and traditional religious groups, to discuss tolerance and the importance of religious leaders and adherents working to bring communities together.

Through meetings, consultations, and visits to religious sites during the year, embassy officials worked with influential religious leaders to emphasize peaceful reconciliation practices as the country continued to cope with the lingering effects of its civil wars.

