

MALAWI 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion and provides for freedom of conscience, religion, belief, and thought. The Malawi Human Rights Commission investigated one case of religious discrimination against a Rastafarian student for wearing dreadlocks, but it was unresolved at year's end. Muslim leaders continued to express concern about the role of Christian religious education in state-funded schools and about the impact of staggered school shifts on the ability of students to attend religious education.

Christians, Muslims, and Hindus often participated in business or civil society organizations together and religious organizations and leaders regularly expressed their opinions on political issues, which received coverage in the media.

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues, including concerns about the religious curriculum, with leaders of religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 18.6 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2016 Demographic and Health Survey, 76.9 percent of the population is Christian and 12.5 percent Muslim. Christian denominations include Roman Catholics at 18.1 percent, Central Africa Presbyterians at 17.4 percent, Seventh-day Adventist/Seventh-day Baptists (the survey groups the two into one category) at 6.9 percent, and Anglicans at 2.6 percent. Another 41.9 percent fall under the "other Christians" category. Individuals claiming no religious affiliation are 0.5 percent and 0.1 percent declare other religions including Hindus, Bahais, Rastafarians, Jews, and Sikhs.

The vast majority of Muslims are Sunni. Most Sunnis of African descent follow the Shafi'i School of Islamic legal thought, while the smaller community of ethnic Asians mostly follows the Hanafi School. There is also a small number of Shia Muslims, mostly of Lebanese origin.

According to the 2008 census, there are two majority Muslim districts, Mangochi (72 percent) and Machinga (64 percent). These neighboring districts at the southern end of Lake Malawi account for more than half of all Muslims in the

country. Most other Muslims also live near the shores of Lake Malawi. Christians are present throughout the country.

Traditional cultural practices with a spiritual dimension are sometimes practiced by Christians and Muslims. For example, the *gule wamkulu* spirit dancers remain of importance among Chewas, who are concentrated in the central region of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion and provides for freedom of conscience, religion, belief, and thought. These constitutional rights may be limited only when the president has declared a state of emergency.

The law states that holders of broadcast licenses “shall not broadcast any material which is...offensive to the religious convictions of any section of the population.”

Religious groups, like nonprofit organizations, must register with the government to be recognized as legal entities. Registered groups, like other legal entities, may own property and open bank accounts in the group’s name. Groups must submit documentation detailing the structure and mission of their organization and pay a fee of 1,000 kwacha (\$1.34). The government reviews the application for administrative compliance only. According to the government, registration does not constitute approval of religious beliefs, nor is it a prerequisite for religious activities. Religious groups may apply to the Ministry of Finance for tax exemptions regardless of registration status.

Detainees have a right to consult with a religious counselor of their choice.

Religious instruction is mandatory in public primary schools, with no opt-out provision, and is available as an elective in public secondary schools. According to the constitution, eliminating religious intolerance is a goal of education. In some schools, the religious curriculum is a Christian-oriented “Bible knowledge” course, while in others it is an interfaith “moral and religious education” course drawing from the Christian, Islamic, Hindu, and Bahai faiths. According to the law, local school management committees, elected at parent-teacher association meetings, decide on which religious curriculum to use. Private Christian and Islamic schools offer religious instruction in their respective faiths. Hybrid “grant-

aided” schools are managed by private, usually religious, institutions, but their teaching staffs are paid by the government. In exchange for this financial support, the government chooses a significant portion of the students who attend. At grant-aided schools, a board appointed by the school’s operators decides whether the “Bible knowledge” or the “moral and religious education” curriculum will be used.

Foreign missionaries are required to have employment permits.

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

Government Practices

A representative of the Rastafarian community reported children with dreadlocks continued to be prohibited from attending public school, where children are required to shave their heads in order to attend. According to the representative, most parents relented and shaved their children’s heads but the children of at least one family continued to be denied access to public school because of their dreadlocks and dropped out of school. The case, and the larger issue of Rastafarian children’s access to education, remained under investigation by the Malawi Human Rights Commission.

Some Muslim groups continued to request the education ministry to discontinue use of the “Bible knowledge” course and use only the broader-based “moral and religious education” curriculum in primary schools, particularly in predominantly Muslim areas. The issue arose most frequently in grant-aided, Catholic-operated schools.

Muslim organizations continued to express concern about the impact of operating schools in two shifts. Due to rapidly rising enrollment, certain schools in urban areas offered classes in two shifts – one in the morning and another in the afternoon, or staggered beginning and ending times. Muslim groups stated the shifts complicated the delivery of religious education at madrassahs in the afternoon on government school premises.

Most government meetings and events began and ended with a prayer, usually Christian in nature. At larger events, government officials generally invited clergy of different faiths to participate.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Christians, Muslims, and Hindus often participated in business or civil society organizations together. Religious organizations and leaders regularly expressed their opinions on political issues and their statements received coverage in the media. For example, the Livingstonia Synod released a statement in November that discussed the “perpetual failure” of the government to have meaningful dialogue about socio-economic challenges.

Religious groups operated 12 radio and four television stations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador met with representatives of religious groups, including representatives from the Muslim Association of Malawi, the largest Islamic association in the country, to discuss their concerns about the shift system and the “Bible knowledge” course. The Ambassador and embassy officials discussed issues of religious freedom with representatives of religious groups, the interfaith Public Affairs Committee, and members of parliament.