

# MOZAMBIQUE 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## 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 political parties from using names or symbols associated with religious groups. Religious groups have the right to organize, worship, and operate schools. According to local organizations, as an Islamic State-affiliated group intensified attacks in Cabo Delgado Province, residents in the province who appeared to be Muslim continued to face risk of detention by police and armed forces. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), news media outlets, and human rights organizations strongly criticized what they termed the government's sometimes heavy-handed response as exacerbating existing grievances among historically marginalized majority-Muslim populations. In August, after the Bishop of Pemba in northern Mozambique faced social media threats for criticizing the government's failure to protect civilians in Cabo Delgado, President Filipe Nyusi met with him and expressed appreciation for his efforts to assist displaced civilians. The draft religious freedom law that the government proposed in 2019 remained pending in parliament at year's end. If approved, it would require religious groups to have a minimum of 500 followers in order to register with the Ministry of Justice.

Religious leaders at the national and provincial level continued to call for religious tolerance and condemned the use of religion to promote violence. As in previous years, as the conflict in Cabo Delgado worsened, Muslim and Christian leaders continued to condemn 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.

The Ambassador discussed the escalating attacks in Cabo Delgado with President Nyusi, the Minister of Justice, and other high-level officials. Among other messages, he noted the continued need to engage partners from the religious community to address effectively the ongoing violence. The U.S. government continued to implement activities in Cabo Delgado to improve faith-based community resilience and work with religious leaders to counter extremist messaging.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 30.1 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to 2019 government census data, 26.2 percent of citizens are Roman Catholic, 18.3 percent Muslim, 15.1 percent Zionist Christian, 14.7 percent evangelical/Pentecostal, 1.6 percent Anglican, and 4.7 percent Jewish, Hindu, and Baha'i. The remaining 19.4 percent did not list a religious affiliation. 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 census figures. Muslim leaders continued to state that their community accounts for 25-30 percent of the total population, a statistic frequently reported in the press. The Muslim population is concentrated in the northern part of 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. 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.

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**

During the year, attacks by Islamic State-Mozambique (IS-M) in Cabo Delgado escalated in intensity and complexity as they spread across the northern districts of the province. In this context, in an attempt to control the situation and stem the tide of violence, police arbitrarily arrested many individuals because they appeared to be Muslim by their clothing or facial hair, according to national Islamic organizations and other media reports.

Some NGOs, news media outlets, and human rights organizations strongly criticized the government's response, including mass arrests, as exacerbating existing grievances of the historically marginalized Muslim-majority populations. As the attacks occurred in a Muslim-majority area, many civilian victims were Muslim as well, according to observers and administrators at camps for internally displaced persons.

IS-M publicly pledged allegiance to ISIS in June 2019. An ISIS press release in June reported that IS-M had affiliated with its Islamic State-Central African Province and claimed responsibility for more than 30 attacks since then. According to analysts, young men returning from studying Islamic teachings

abroad following a more “austere” form of Islam than historically practiced in the country helped contribute to the radicalization of youth.

Reporting on the attacks remained limited and was often characterized as unreliable due to a strong security force presence, electricity and cell network blackouts, and what journalists termed a government-imposed media blackout in the region.

On August 31, President Nyusi met with the Bishop of Pemba, Luis Fernando Lisboa, who had faced social media threats from government supporters after he criticized the government’s response in Cabo Delgado. After the meeting, President Nyusi called Lisboa “our bishop” and emphasized the importance of dialogue and collaboration with the Catholic Church to help address the humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict. Muslim leaders also expressed concern regarding the growing humanitarian crisis in Cabo Delgado.

In April, the government suspended all religious services, among other public and private gatherings, pursuant to a state of emergency (SOE) order issued to prevent the spread of COVID-19, but it relaxed these restrictions in August to permit gatherings of no more than 50 persons. Local media reported that several religious leaders were arrested and fined for violating the SOE, and in one instance for hosting a large gathering of students at a religious school in the central province of Sofala. Observers indicated that SOE religious enforcement was not targeted against a particular religion but was enforced across all religious groups. A faith-based NGO reported that prior to resumption of religious services, the Minister of Health hosted religious leaders to discuss future steps and to share information on safely resuming services, consistent with the legal requirements, including a ban on persons younger than 18 and older than 65 attending services. The government established a commission that included Muslim and Christian religious leaders to monitor and inspect venues that had applied to resume services.

Religious leaders continued to express concern that a draft law on religious practices, proposed in 2019 that was still pending in parliament at year’s end, could prevent religious groups that have fewer than 500 followers from registering with the Ministry of Justice. Leaders of small religious communities expressed concern that the registration requirement would prevent them from registering their organizations. According to a religious leader, the draft law would also require followers to have their identities attested by a notary, which would create an administrative barrier to religious practice.

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

Although IS-M fighters said they targeted Christians and Christian villages, reporters and local aid workers stated that in practice they made little distinction among their victims. Media reports indicated that IS-M targeted both Muslim and Christian communities. They occupied entire communities and burned religious and government structures, including in May when four Catholic priests fled to Tanzania after their mission was burned. On September 6, local media reported that IS-M fighters released two Brazilian nuns who had been kidnapped by IS-M; their release was facilitated by representatives of the Catholic Church, in cooperation with the government.

Prominent Muslim leaders continued to condemn the attacks in the northern part of the country, stating that the strict version of Islam preached by those allegedly responsible was not in line with the country's traditional Islamic culture and practice.

Civil society and religious organizations conducted outreach to promote religious tolerance during the year. An interfaith group of leaders led an effort to provide food to needy families during the COVID-19 pandemic, distributing more than 50 tons of meat in several places around the country, in churches, mosques, and community centers. A September 26 interreligious prayer ceremony of Muslim and Christian leaders called for interfaith peace as a key component of economic and political development.

A coalition of religious groups from the northern provinces of Cabo Delgado, Nampula, and Niassa, and led by Bishop Luiz Fernando Lisboa and Islamic leader Nassuralah Dula, formed an interfaith network in November to support displaced civilian populations affected by the violence and to discuss resolution of the conflict.

On December 10, the Community of Sant'Egidio hosted a group of interreligious and civil society leaders in a symposium that focused on social harmony and cohesion.

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

The Ambassador engaged President Nyusi, Minister of Defense Jaime Neto, Minister of Justice Helena Kida, Interior Minister Amade Miquidade, and other senior officials on the escalating violence in the northern region. Among other

messages, he noted the continued need to engage partners from the religious community to address effectively 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.

The embassy also continued its support of a faith-based project in Cabo Delgado led by the Islamic Council of Mozambique designed to strengthen community ties, foster resilience, and develop locally based strategies to combat violent extremism. The embassy also worked with local religious leaders to counter extremist narratives.

The embassy engaged in digital outreach on social media during Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, welcoming continued engagement to achieve shared goals, commending their resilience in finding creative ways to celebrate during the pandemic, and encouraging continued observance of COVID-19 prevention measures during holiday celebrations.