

MOZAMBIQUE 2019 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 faith-based political parties and bans the use of religious symbols in politics. Religious groups have the right to organize, worship, and operate schools. In the northern province of Cabo Delgado, the government responded to escalating violent attacks by groups possibly linked to Islamist groups by deploying security forces and arresting hundreds of individuals. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and news media outlets continued to characterize these operations as sometimes heavy-handed, potentially exacerbating existing grievances of what they termed to be already marginalized populations. Members of the Islamic Council (CISLAMO) said that those who dressed in traditional Islamic clothing or wore beards risked detention on suspicion of involvement with what the government termed violent extremists. In May the government proposed a draft law that that would create a code of conduct for religious leaders and 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. For example, Muslim leaders continued to condemn the violence in Cabo Delgado, characterizing it as inconsistent with the tenets of Islam. Interfaith leaders as well as government officials welcomed Pope Francis' August visit.

The Ambassador discussed the escalating attacks in the northern region with the Minister of Justice and other high-level officials, noting the challenge this situation posed to religious tolerance. The Ambassador hosted an iftar during which religious tolerance was discussed with members of Islamic civil society organizations and religious leaders. U.S. embassy representatives discussed the importance of peace and reconciliation at an interfaith conference organized by the Council of Religions in Mozambique (COREM).

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 27.92 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to 2019 Mozambique 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 13.4 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 estimates. 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, 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 their 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

The government responded to escalating violent attacks in the northernmost districts of Cabo Delgado Province by deploying security forces and arresting hundreds of individuals. Some NGOs and news media outlets continued to characterize these operations as heavy handed, potentially exacerbating existing grievances of what they termed to be already marginalized populations. Sources stated that the group perpetrating the attacks was not identified definitively, though it reportedly had links with ISIS as an affiliate of the Islamic State Central African Province. It is sometimes referred to locally as "al-Shabaab," although sources stated there was no established connection to the East African al-Shabaab terrorist group, and it was composed primarily of individuals who followed what observers said was a strict version of Islam. The attacks, which began in October 2017, included killings of security force members, beheading of civilians, and theft and destruction to private property. As the attacks took place in a region of the country where Muslims predominated, many if not most of the civilian victims likely were Muslim as well, according to observers.

Members of the CISLAMO said the situation in Cabo Delgado was dire and that those who dressed in traditional Islamic clothing or wore beards risked detention on suspicion of involvement with what the government termed violent extremists. Council members said government security forces arbitrarily detained Muslim

leaders, in some cases for months. They said CISLAMO representatives in Cabo Delgado secured their release by working with the authorities to identify individuals as belonging to the mainstream Muslim community and not to the “bandits” or “violent extremists.”

The government charged alleged participants in the Cabo Delgado violence with crimes including first degree murder, use of banned weapons, membership in a criminal association, and instigating collective disobedience against public order. The courts sentenced dozens of convicted participants in the Cabo Delgado Province attacks to jail terms of up to 40 years. In April more than 100 detained suspects were acquitted or released due to lack of evidence. Representatives of international organizations with access to the region continued to state they believed the number of individuals arrested was higher than that reported by the government.

Human rights organizations said the government continued policies that 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.

President Filipe Nyusi and other high level government officials publicly denounced the perpetrators of the violence in Cabo Delgado as “evildoers” and rejected a link between Islam and the violence. According to CISLAMO, the Muslim community has forged a reliable partnership with the government to address the challenge.

Minister of Justice, Constitutional, and Religious Affairs Joaquim Veríssimo raised concerns in June about the proliferation of religious groups, especially unregistered groups and those the government said it believed to be promoting harmful practices. The government subsequently prepared a draft law that would create a code of conduct for religious leaders and would require religious groups to have a minimum of 500 followers in order to register with the Ministry of Justice. The Jewish community requested an exemption due to the very small number of adherents in country, estimated to be fewer than several hundred. The government stated it intended to conduct consultations on the draft law with religious groups. There were no reports of difficulty with religious groups registering with the Ministry of Justice.

In August Pope Francis met with President Nyusi and other government officials, as well as an interfaith delegation of religious leaders and youth during a three-day

visit to the capital. The pope conveyed a message of reconciliation and warned that violence only created more problems and encouraged Mozambicans to choose a better, “more noble” path. He expressed hope that peace would prevail and become the new norm, and that reconciliation was the best road to overcome the difficulties and challenges the nation faces. He called the conflict between the government and the opposition Renamo group a conflict between “brothers,” while acknowledging that together they shared a common destiny and a common land. In doing so, the pope highlighted the roles each side must play to achieve durable peace and prosperity. President Nyusi echoed the theme of reconciliation and promised to “reunite the Mozambican family” to create an environment of peace and stability. Religious leaders called the visit an expression of the interfaith harmony in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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. A Muslim leader in Maputo stated that those responsible for the violence could not possibly be true Muslims, understand Islam, and perpetrate such violence, particularly given what they said was the deeply ingrained culture of openness and religious tolerance in the country that featured mixed religious families in which Muslims celebrated Christmas with their Christian family members. The leader of a Maputo mosque and prominent civil society members coauthored a report examining the origins and nature of what was termed the extremist threat in the north of the country. The study, which was based on interviews conducted in 2017 with persons closely connected with the violence in Cabo Delgado, characterized the group’s membership as consisting mainly of disaffected youth motivated by complex political, economic, and social factors including feelings of marginalization and disagreements with religious authorities in Cabo Delgado.

Civil society and religious organizations conducted outreach to promote religious tolerance during the year. In August, COREM, a faith-based NGO whose stated purpose was to encourage constructive dialogue and interaction among religious groups, hosted its second annual National Summit on Peace and Reconciliation. The summit focused on the recent peace agreements, and the role of women and religious groups in the peace process. It convened individuals from across government and civil society with the goal of helping the country break free from the cycle of what it termed to be never-ending wars by embracing peace,

prosperity, and social justice. The summit was widely attended by religious and political leaders from throughout the country, as well as the international community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador engaged Minister of Justice Joaquim Verissimo and other high level officials on the escalating violence in the northern region. He noted the challenge this posed to 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 groups. The Ambassador hosted an iftar attended by representatives of Islamic civil society and religious organizations. At the iftar, the Ambassador discussed the conflict in Cabo Delgado Province and highlighted the importance of the Muslim community's leadership in addressing the problem at the grass roots level and encouraged continued effort towards developing and implementing effective solutions.

Embassy officials also discussed the importance of religious freedom and expressed U.S. support for this fundamental right with interfaith leaders at the COREM-sponsored conference to promote peace and reconciliation. For the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief, marked on August 22, the embassy engaged on social media.