

MALAWI 2015 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 reported one case of religious discrimination against a Rastafarian pupil at school for wearing dreadlocks. Muslim leaders continued to express concern about the role of Christian religious education in state-funded schools.

Christians, Muslims, and Hindus often participated in business or civil society organizations together and interfaith groups worked to ensure peaceful coexistence.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.9 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2014 Malawi Development Goals Endline Survey, 18.5 percent of the population identifies as Catholic, 15.5 percent as Central Africa Presbyterian, 13.3 percent as Muslim, 5.6 percent as Seventh-day Adventist/Seventh-day Baptists (the survey grouped the two into one category), and 1.9 percent as Anglican. Another 39.9 percent fall under the “other Christians” category while 0.8 percent declared another religion and 4.4 percent declared following no religion. The 2010 Demographic and Health Survey found that 72 percent of the Muslim population is ethnic Yao and 16 percent is ethnic Chewa. 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. There are small numbers of Hindus, Bahais, Rastafarians, Jews, Sikhs, and atheists.

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.

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

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 1000 kwacha (\$2). 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.

Religious instruction is mandatory in public primary schools 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

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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.

Government Practices

The Malawi Human Rights Commission reported that it received one complaint of infringement of the right to religious freedom. It involved a Rastafarian child with dreadlocks who was prohibited from attending a public school and later dropped out.

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 also expressed concern about the impact of operating schools in two shifts. Due to rapidly rising enrollment, certain schools in urban areas offer classes in two shifts one in the morning and another in the afternoon, or staggered beginning and ending times. Muslim groups stated the implementation of shifts complicated the delivery of religious education at madrassahs in the afternoon.

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.

The interfaith Public Affairs Committee (PAC), composed of leaders of the principal religious groups, mediated a discussion between representatives of different faiths on the issue of proselytism in response to complaints by Christian

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clergy that Muslim imams had recently settled in predominantly Christian areas. Muslim and Christians leaders resolved to proactively address issues that could lead to increased religious tension, to foster interreligious dialogue in schools and the media, and to disassociate themselves from “foreign elements” with a religious agenda.

Religious groups operated 12 radio and four television stations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with political leaders and one of the country’s two main Islamic associations to discuss Muslim concerns about the religious education curriculum and the shift system in schools. Embassy officials discussed issues of religious freedom with the interfaith PAC, members of parliament, and the Malawi Council of Churches.