



2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Malawi

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Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion and provides for freedom of conscience, religion, belief, and thought. Muslim leaders continued to express concern about the role of Christian religious education in many state-funded schools. Muslim community members forcibly removed a district primary education director whom they accused of religious bias against Muslims.

Christians, Muslims, and Hindus often participated in business or civil society organizations together. Interfaith groups worked to ensure nonviolent national and local elections and a peaceful transition of power. There were reports of individuals being excluded from both Catholic and Presbyterian churches for attending traditional religious ceremonies known as *Gule Wamkulu*.

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues with political figures and leaders of religious groups. The embassy hosted an iftar for prominent members of the Muslim community in Blantyre at which the Ambassador advocated for religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.4 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the 2010 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), 86 percent of the population identifies as Christian and 13 percent as Muslim. There are small numbers of Hindus, Bahais, Rastafarians, Jews, and atheists.

According to the DHS, among the Christian population, 20.6 percent are Roman Catholics, 16.6 percent Central Africa Presbyterians, 6.7 percent Seventh-day Adventists/Seventh-day Baptists (the survey grouped the two into one category), 2.3 percent Anglicans, and 39.5 percent other Christians. In the DHS sample, 72 percent of Muslims are ethnic Yaos and 16 percent are 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.

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. It states detainees have a right to consult with a religious counselor of their choice.

The law states that with regard to religious broadcasting, "licensees shall not broadcast any material which is ... offensive to the religious convictions of any section of the population."

Religious groups, like other nonprofit organizations, must register with the government to be recognized as a legal entity. 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 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

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.

On July 30, in the Mazonga neighborhood in the majority-Muslim district of Mangochi, community leaders petitioned authorities for a second time to remove from office Chauluka Mukawe, the local education ministry official responsible for primary education. They accused him of requiring the Bible knowledge curriculum against the will of the community and of targeting female teachers who wore the hijab for transfer out of the district. On August 1, before the government had responded, protesters acted to remove Muwake themselves by cleaning out his office and living quarters and leaving his belongings on the street, where they were damaged. Fearing for his life, Muwake did not return to the area and was officially transferred to another district in October.

Muslim organizations also expressed concern about the implementation of the shift system in some schools. Due to rapidly rising enrollment, certain schools in urban areas operated two shifts, with one group of students in the morning and another in the afternoon, or staggered beginning and ending times. Muslim groups stated the implementation of shifts impeded some Muslim students from receiving religious education at madrassahs in the afternoon.

The government allowed detainees to practice their religion. According to the Malawi Prison Service, the prison chaplain system included offices at each prison to facilitate prisoners' access to spiritual counselors of their choice.

Most government meetings and events began and ended with a non-sectarian prayer. Government officials generally ensured religious diversity at larger government events by inviting clergy of different faiths to participate.

The registrar general's office in the justice ministry reported approximately 45 religious groups registered during the year. According to the office, it approved all registration applications by religious groups.

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 broad coverage in the media.

The interfaith Public Affairs Committee (PAC), composed of leaders of the principal religious groups, worked to promote presidential and national assembly elections free of violence and worked to ensure a peaceful transition of power following hotly contested election results. The poll also resulted in the election of the national assembly's first Jewish member.

There were reports of individuals being excluded from both Catholic and Presbyterian churches for attending *Gule Wamkulu* ceremonies. Some Christian churches reportedly maintained a formal policy of excommunicating members who participated in *Gule Wamkulu*.

Religious groups operated 12 radio and four television stations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with political leaders and leaders of the country's two primary Islamic associations to discuss their concerns about the religious education curriculum and the shift system in schools. Embassy officials discussed issues of religious freedom with the interfaith PAC.

The Ambassador hosted an iftar for prominent members of the Muslim community in the southern city of Blantyre. Her remarks underscored the importance of freedom of religion and noted the lack of religiously motivated violence in connection with the May 20 elections.
