

MADAGASCAR

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The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Before the March 2009 coup d'état, the U.S. Government discussed religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights, but after the coup, U.S. interaction with the Government was extremely limited.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 226,657 square miles and a population of 20.6 million. Although precise official figures were unavailable, approximately half of the population is Christian. There are four main Christian denominations: Roman Catholic, Reformed Protestant Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM), Lutheran, and Anglican. Smaller groups include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh-day Adventists. A significant minority of citizens also observes indigenous religious practices.

Muslims constitute 10 to 15 percent of the population, with strong concentrations in the north, northwest, and southeast. Native-born persons and ethnic Indian and Pakistani immigrants make up the majority of Muslims, as well as a small number of Hindus.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The April 2007 constitutional referendum eliminated the explicit secular nature of the state, but it did not diminish legal protection for freedom of religion. Former President Ravalomanana's position as a lay vice-president of the FJKM generated allegations of favoritism, and his occasional comments expressing a desire to transform the country into "a Christian state" generated controversy. With the March 2009 coup d'état, Protestants expressed concern about a backlash against the FJKM.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Assumption, All Saints' Day, and Christmas.

State-run media granted religious organizations free access to state media provided that their use constituted a public service. National radio and television feature weekly Muslim programs, and daily 15-minute programs including the call to prayer were featured on national television during the month of Ramadan.

The law mandates that religious organizations register with the Ministry of Interior. By registering, religious organizations acquire the legal status necessary to receive direct bequests and other gifts. To qualify as a religious association, a group must consist of at least 100 members, with an elected administrative council of no more than nine members, each of whom must be a citizen. If the group's leadership and faithful are foreign, they have the right to form an association "reputed to be foreign." If the association's membership expands to 1,000 members, the administrative council may apply to be officially recognized.

Religious organizations that fail to meet the Ministry of Interior's registration requirements are free to register as simple associations. Simple associations do not have the right to receive gifts or hold religious services, limiting them to social projects. If these groups overstep what is allowed for their status, they violate the law and in rare circumstances are subject to legal action. Ministry officials estimated in 2008 that there were more than 1,000 religious organizations in the country operating without official state recognition, including both simple associations and unregistered organizations.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

In April 2009 leaders of the original New Protestant Church in Madagascar, formerly known by its Malagasy acronym FPVM, were permitted by the current regime to reopen the church, which had closed in 2005. The Government previously permitted the reorganization of the FPVM in 2007 under a new name and with new leadership. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (EURD) remained banned after overstepping the limits of its registration in 2005.

Muslim leaders estimated that as many as 5 percent of Muslims were considered noncitizens, despite being born in the country and having longstanding family roots there, because of citizenship laws and procedures. Lack of citizenship precluded their enjoying voting rights and other important civic benefits. Members of the Muslim community suggested that a Muslim-sounding name alone could delay one's citizenship application indefinitely; others suggested that their ethnic/religious difference sometimes limited their access to government services and financial assistance.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On March 17, 2009, military members of what became the self-proclaimed transitional government beat, abused, and briefly detained FJKM President Pastor Lala Rasendrasina. He was reportedly targeted due to his proximity to President Ravalomanana at the time of the coup, rather than for religious reasons. The new regime did not condemn the attack or prosecute possible suspects.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Some Muslims felt they received unequal treatment in schools, hospitals, private businesses, and the workplace.

The four largest Christian denominations occupy an important role in public life, although their collective role in politics has diminished somewhat in recent years. The Council of Christian Churches in Madagascar, led at the time by the Catholic archbishop, served as an intermediary in the early stages of the 2009 crisis but

withdrew entirely following the March 2009 coup. Leaders of both the FJKM (associated with the former government of Marc Ravalomanana) and the Catholic Church (associated with the current regime of Andry Rajoelina) tried to maintain a careful distance from the ongoing political struggle. However, both (and especially the Catholic Church) have seen their reputations as neutral actors in civil society severely tainted by perceptions of partisan engagement during the recent political turbulence.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Before the March 2009 coup, the U.S. Government discussed religious freedom with the Government and civil society as part of its overall policy to promote human rights, but after the coup, U.S. interaction with the Government was extremely limited.

The U.S. Ambassador publicly condemned the detention and abuse of Pastor Rasendrasahina in March 2009.