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Madagascar

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND LABOR

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 226,657 square miles, and its population is approximately 16 million. Although precise official figures are unavailable, approximately half of the population belongs to one of the country's four Christian denominations. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest, followed by the Reformed Protestant Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM). President Ravalomanana is a lay Vice President of FJKM. The Lutheran and Anglican Churches account for most of the remainder of the country's Christians. Most other citizens follow traditional indigenous religions. Muslims constitute slightly less than 10 percent of the population, with strong concentrations in the north and northwestern portions of the island. Native Malagasy and ethnic Indians who have immigrated over the past century make up the majority of the Muslims in the country. There are a small number of Hindus among the ethnic Indians.

Foreign missionary groups are active in the country, including Catholics, Protestants of various denominations, the Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full, and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. There is no state religion.

A 1962 Ordinance strongly recommends, but does not require, religious organizations to register with the Ministry of Interior. Registration provides a religious organization with the legal status necessary for receipt of direct bequests and other gifts. There are no penalties for failure to register.

The Malagasy Council of Christian Churches (FFKM) is the umbrella organization for Madagascar's four major Christian denominations. Comprised of the Roman Catholic, FJKM, Lutheran, and Anglican churches, the FFKM is a key player on a broad range of issues in Madagascar. The FFKM is a traditional leader in education, and recently their role has expanded to include activities such as coordinating a national campaign against HIV/AIDS and election monitoring. In the political arena, the FFKM has been a mediator, bringing together antagonistic factions, but has occasionally taken an overtly political position. During the 2001 presidential campaign and political crisis that followed, the FFKM took an activist stance, overtly supporting and encouraging parishioners to support then-Mayor of Antananarivo and FJKM Vice President Marc Ravalomanana in his ultimately successful bid for president. The FFKM remains an active force on social and political issues.

Foreign missionary groups operate freely in the country. Several faith-based organizations, some with international affiliations, operate freely in health and social services, development projects, schools, and higher education.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In the period since the political crisis ended in mid-2002, there have been no reports of government restrictions on religious freedom. Unlike in the period covered by the previous report, there were no reports that the Government threatened and mistreated church pastors or imposed restrictions on religious gatherings.

Numerous religious organizations operate freely in all regions of the country, often disseminating their message through public and private media. Religious organizations are granted free access to state-run media on the grounds that such access constitutes a public service. In January 2001, reports surfaced that a denomination called Kibanguists, a small (approximately 5,000 members) non-registered group with origins in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and professing a mix of Christian and traditional African beliefs, had been denied access to state-run media on grounds that the Kibanguists' leadership supported the political opposition. The Ministry of the Interior reports that the group is welcome to register, but the Kibanguists have not done so.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Ethnic Malagasy occasionally express resentment toward members of the predominantly Muslim Indo-Pakistani ("Karana") community. This attitude is rooted in the Karana's relative prosperity rather than religious affiliation. An October 2002 meeting between President Ravalomanana and Karana leaders has led to follow-on meetings, including in April, when a Malagasy Muslim Association delegation called on the President to express their support for his economic development plans and their willingness to work toward its realization.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

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