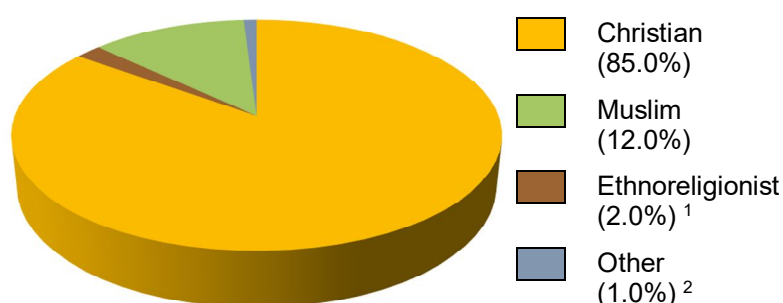


LIBERIA



Area: 111,369 km ²	Population³: 4.2 million	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): English, Mande, Kru, Mel ⁴
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Legal Framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

Liberia was one of the countries of West Africa hardest hit by the Ebola epidemic during the year of this report, along with Guinea and Sierra Leone. In early August 2014 the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared an international health emergency. The head of state, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf reacted initially by imposing strict security measures. She later thought these steps were mistaken as they created significant tensions and mistrust among the population.⁵ Liberia was the country hardest hit by the Ebola epidemic. By May 2015, when the epidemic was officially declared to be over, there had been about 10,600 cases of the disease and more than 4,800 deaths. The crisis also tipped the economy back into recession, and the already inadequate healthcare system was still further weakened, while broad sections of the population were left in poverty and hunger. Although the WHO declared Liberia to be Ebola-free on 29th December 2015, the often devastating consequences of the epidemic continue to this day.⁶

The outbreak also put a huge strain on the traditionally good and fundamentally harmonious relationships between the different religions and faith communities in Liberia. It became clear that poverty and the threat of destitution were often closely linked to intolerance and the exclusion of minorities. To cite one example, according to the Vatican news agency Fides, more than 5,900 Liberian children lost one or both parents as a result of the Ebola outbreak. Many were taken in by family members, but many more were left living on the streets or with foster families. However, it was discovered that especially children living in foster homes tended to be abused or given nothing to eat. Many of these children were unable to attend school. Other children were put into orphanages, where they were teased by the other children for being Ebola orphans. Some children, who were left entirely unsupported, ended up begging on the streets.⁷ The Catholic Church in Liberia, which is heavily engaged in social and charitable work in the country, also paid a high price in the battle against Ebola. For example, the Hospitaller Order of Saint John of God in Liberia and Sierra Leone lost four religious brothers, one religious Sister and three lay co-workers in the hospitals of Monrovia and Lunsar. They had contracted the disease while caring for the sick.⁸

The mistrust and social rejection that resulted from the Ebola epidemic in Liberia still weigh heavily on a country which, although poor, has generally enjoyed a long tradition of peaceful coexistence between the various different religious traditions.

Unlike many other states in the region, Liberia, which was founded in 1820 for the resettlement of former slaves from the USA, was never dominated by Islam as the prevailing cultural force. Consequently, Christianity was more firmly established there than elsewhere in West Africa. The vast majority of Liberia's inhabitants are Christians.⁹ In practice, these boundaries are somewhat fluid, which means that many people follow a variety of different religious rites and practices at the same time. There are two major religious umbrella organisations, the (Protestant) Liberian Council of Churches, and the National Muslim Council of Liberia.

The constitution and laws of Liberia guarantee separation of state and church, and grant complete religious freedom, which is respected and protected by the state.¹⁰ Overall, the climate with regard to religion is one of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, not only between the various Christian communities but also between Christians and Muslims. This situation has not manifestly changed during the period covered by this report. However, the Ebola epidemic has had an effect on religious practice and culture. Thus the rapid spread of the virus and the extreme danger of infection deterred many people from burying their dead in the traditional Christian or Muslim manner¹¹ – a serious restriction in a society where awareness of death is an important part of the national psyche, as in almost all cultures of sub-Saharan Africa.¹²

There is no official requirement for religious groups to register with the authorities, although it is general practice and forms part of the legal routine.¹³ Religious organisations that do register can, like other organisations, benefit from certain tax concessions and relief from import duties. There are no reports of any requests being refused or of any discrimination against those applying. Private schools, many of which are owned and run by Christian or Muslim organisations, receive financial support from the state.

Incidents

There were no institutional changes or significant incidents relating to religious freedom during the period of this report. There were however some isolated incidents of religious conflict between the members of various ethnic groups in some remoter parts of the country.¹⁴ However, it was often unclear whether these were to do with religious motives or to other cultural issues.¹⁵ In most cases, the tensions were resolved through the mediation of traditional or religious leaders.

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

The consequences of the bloody civil war in Liberia still present major challenges both for the state and for the churches and other religious communities.¹⁶ Between 1989 and 2003 more than 200,000 people lost their lives in the civil war. At one point there were over a million refugees, including several hundred thousand people who were internally displaced. Most of these have now either returned to their former homes or settled permanently in the places to which they fled. Nonetheless, the refugee problem is not yet fully resolved.

More recently, the political instability in Ivory Coast, Liberia's eastern neighbour, has also threatened security in Liberia itself.¹⁷ Following the presidential elections in Ivory Coast in 2010, heavy fighting broke out there. After the election, Alassana Ouattara from the northern part of the country was declared the winner. However, his election is still contested, even though it has been recognised by the international community. His former opponent, ex-President Laurent Gbagbo is now facing human rights charges in the International Court of Justice in the Hague (see the chapter on Ivory Coast in the full religious freedom report).

The situation has calmed somewhat, and the number of Ivorian refugees now returning to their homes across the frontier – often with the support of the UNHCR – is growing. Well over 10,000 people were reported to have returned during the period covered by this report. Nonetheless, as long as the political situation in the region, and particularly in Ivory Coast, remains unstable, repercussions could occur at any time. Hence it is still too early to speak of a return to normality.

¹ Traditional African religions

² Government of The Republic of Liberia, 2008 National Population and Housing Census, cited in: Munzinger Archiv 2016

³ CIA 2016: The World Factbook, estimate, July 2015

⁴ Languages: English (official), a form of West African pidgin English, plus the Mande, Kru und Mel languages which serve as everyday vehicular languages, Munzinger Archiv 2016

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ <http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/10/09/liberia Ebola hat viele Kinder zu Waisen gemacht/1177729>

⁸ http://www.fides.org/de/news/35360-VATIKAN_KIRCHLICHE_MITARBEITER_DIE_2014_ERMORDET_WURDEN#.VkyXh14kScE

⁹ Government of The Republic of Liberia, 2008 National Population and Housing Census, cited in: Munzinger Archiv 2016

¹⁰ US Department of State 2016: International Religious Freedom Report 2014

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² <http://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/medizin/ebola-simulation-beerdigungen-sind-das-groesste-problem-a-1000372.html>

¹³ US Department of State 2016: International Religious Freedom Report 2014

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Background to the conflict in northern Liberia (Hintergründe zu dem seit Jahren schwelenden Konflikt im Norden Liberias): <http://www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de/fachbereiche/sozialwissenschaften/forschung/akuf/kriege-archiv/ueberarb-260-liberia/>

¹⁶ Munzinger Archiv 2016

¹⁷ UNHCR 2016: 2015 UNHCR country operations profile – Liberia