

# ZAMBIA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution declares the country a Christian nation while prohibiting religious discrimination and providing for freedom of conscience, belief, and religion. On October 27, the parliament created a Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs, whose role beyond directing national prayers had not yet been defined by the end of the year. Religion was a dominant theme in the pre- and post-general election environment. Various religious groups freely and publicly supported political parties of their choice. Some ruling party political leaders, however, labeled opposition party members as “Satanists,” in a move critics stated played on long-held social fears of different denominations. On October 18, the country celebrated a second annual National Day for Prayer and Fasting; however, many church leaders did not participate, stating it blurred the line between church and state. During the commemoration, President Edgar Lungu reaffirmed the country as a Christian nation. Some religious groups continued to criticize the government’s decision to build a Christian interdenominational church, arguing it inherently discriminated against non-Christian faiths and breached constitutional provisions for church-state separation.

Incidents of mobs attacking and killing individuals suspected of practicing witchcraft remained widespread. Victims were often elderly members of the community. In August police reported two siblings, Lubasi Mukena and Mubukwano Mukena, killed their 81-year-old father and critically injured their 68-year-old mother with a machete in Limulunga, Western Province, because they suspected their parents were practicing witchcraft. Community members with white hair were reportedly associated with witchcraft and were targets of attacks and death threats. Some non-Christian groups continued to report societal intolerance and said they were often called “Satanists.”

U.S. embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, met with government officials and with religious leaders to discuss issues of religious freedom, including enforcement of registration laws, interfaith relations, and the role of religion in the general election.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 15.5 million (July 2016 estimate). According to current U.S. government estimates, 95.5 percent of the country is

Christian: 75.3 percent identify as Protestant and 20.2 percent as Roman Catholic. Among Protestants, the Anglican Church and evangelical and Pentecostal groups have the largest numbers of adherents. Nearly 2 percent of the population is Muslim, with smaller numbers of Hindus, Bahais, Buddhists, Jews, and Sikhs. Approximately 1.8 percent of the population adheres to other belief systems, including indigenous religions and witchcraft, and there are small communities that hold no religious beliefs. Many people combine Christianity and indigenous beliefs.

Muslim communities are primarily concentrated in Lusaka and in Eastern and Copperbelt Provinces and are often divided along ethnic or national lines. Many are immigrants from South Asia, Somalia, and the Middle East who have acquired citizenship. A small minority of indigenous persons are also Muslim. According to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahai of Zambia, the Bahai community consists of approximately 6,000 adherents located primarily in Northwestern and Southern Provinces. There are approximately 10,000 Hindus, mostly of South Asian descent. Jews number approximately 50, mostly in Lusaka and Luwingu Districts.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution declares the country to be a Christian nation, but upholds freedom of conscience, belief, and religion for all persons. It prohibits discrimination based on religion and provides for the right of individuals to manifest and propagate religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. It protects the freedom of individuals to change their religion or belief. It states no one shall be compelled to take an oath or perform acts contrary to his or her religious belief. The law prescribes legal recourse against, and penalties of fines and imprisonment for violations of religious freedom.

Religious groups must register with the chief registrar of societies in the Ministry of Home Affairs and pay regular statutory fees. To register, a group must have a unique name, possess a constitution consistent with the country's laws, and adhere to laws pertaining to labor and employment practices and criminal conduct. The chief registrar's office may consult with the police and religious umbrella organizations, called "church mother bodies," to determine a group's suitability for registration. Major church mother bodies include the Zambia Episcopal Conference (Catholic churches), the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia

(evangelical Protestant churches), and the Council of Churches in Zambia (traditional Protestant churches). The law allows the minister of home affairs to revoke the registration of religious groups. Grounds for revocation include failure to pay registration fees or a finding by the minister that the group professes purposes or has taken or intends to take actions that run counter to the interests of “peace, welfare, or good order.” Groups may appeal this finding through the courts. The government has the authority to levy fines and prison sentences of up to seven years against unregistered religious groups and their members but traditionally has not pursued such penalties.

The constitution affords religious groups the right to establish and maintain private schools and provide religious instruction to members of their religious communities. The government requires religious instruction in all schools from grades one through nine; students may request education in their religion and may opt out of religious instruction only if the school is not able to accommodate their request. Religious education after grade nine is optional and is not offered at all schools. The religious curriculum focuses on Christian teachings, but also incorporates comparative studies of Islam, Hinduism, and traditional beliefs.

On October 27, the parliament approved President Lungu’s proposal to create a Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs. While the president stated the ministry’s purpose was to direct and regulate the religious affairs of the country, by the end of the year, it had only focused on rededicating Zambia as a Christian nation and leading Christian prayers for good crop yields and rains.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

In an August 11 constitutional referendum, held alongside the country’s general election, voters rejected the proposal to move language deeming the country a Christian nation from the preamble to the bill of rights section of the constitution. Discussion of a second referendum continued, but the content of a new bill of rights remained unclear.

Religion was a dominant theme surrounding the general election on August 11. The ruling Patriotic Front (PF) frequently used Christian imagery and messaging to support President Lungu’s reelection campaign. Government-run and PF-friendly media often propagated deliberately Christian messages saying President Lungu was “sent by God” or “chosen” to lead the nation. PF supporters and media

frequently denigrated opposition candidate Hakainde Hichilema, whom PF supporters called a “Satanist.” Critics stated this charge stemmed from his rumored associations with Freemasons, his membership in a Seventh-day Adventist congregation, and his general lack of Christian allusions in prior campaign messages. Observers stated Hichilema significantly increased Christian references in the campaign in response to these accusations.

In October the government named Godfridah Sumaili to head the newly created Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs. The Catholic and Protestant church mother bodies, along with leaders of minority religions, opposed the creation of the ministry, stating citizens were already able to freely practice their faith. As of the end of the year, the government had not shared clear guidelines on the role and operation of the ministry.

On October 18, the country held its second National Day for Prayer and Fasting. Many church leaders did not participate, stating the event blurred the line between church and state. Various religious groups who participated contributed only minimally. During the government-sponsored event, President Lungu reaffirmed the country’s identification as a Christian nation. The president held a prayer day against political violence on June 24, again facing criticism the event was politically motivated, as it occurred during the general election campaign.

Prominent religious groups continued to argue the state should not be involved in building churches, including the proposed Interdenominational House of Prayer, which was incomplete at year’s end. The Council of Churches in Zambia continued to state the government building a Christian church discriminated against Muslims and other non-Christian groups. Several religious leaders outside the council expressed the same sentiment.

Religious groups reported that the government had yet to publish the findings of a 2015 study on allowing broader inclusivity of diverse faiths in the religious education curriculum. Smaller groups were incorporated in the curriculum consultation process but representatives of minority groups said their contributions largely went ignored.

After hearing concerns about community members with white hair being associated with witchcraft, President Lungu in January reaffirmed the need for sensitization and building of family value systems to ensure the aged are not stigmatized and discriminated against. In February a magistrate called for the amendment of the Witchcraft Act to ensure that individuals who attack others on

suspicion of witchcraft are prosecuted in court to prevent citizens from taking the law into their own hands.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Suspected practitioners of witchcraft, particularly elderly members of the community, were often subject to attacks and mob violence, according to tribal chiefs and a former police official. In August police reported two siblings, Lubasi Mukena and Mubukwano Mukena, killed their 81-year-old father and critically injured their 68-year-old mother with a machete in Limulunga, Western Province. According to police, the children suspected their parents were practicing witchcraft.

Some non-Christian communities continued to report being called “Satanist” for adhering to religious or denominational beliefs considered outside the mainstream. Bahai and Messianic Jewish community leaders in particular continued to express concerns that some churches singled out their practitioners as “Satanists.”

Leaders of ecumenical movements, including the Zambia Episcopal Conference, the Christian Council of Zambia, and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia, continued to hold regular meetings to promote mutual understanding and advocacy on religious issues, including by promoting the restriction of government involvement in leading worship and religious practice. Women’s groups such as the Zambian Women Interfaith Network brought together Muslim and Christian women and continued to promote mutual understanding and to work toward common goals, including freedom to worship without government interference or interdenominational tension.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, frequently met with and attended events hosted by government officials to discuss topics related to religious freedom, such as enforcement of registration laws, government-run religious observance, broadcast guidelines, interfaith relations, and the use of religion to denigrate political opponents during the general election campaign.

The embassy also met with leaders from Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Bahai, and other religious groups to discuss interfaith relations, discrimination, government regulations, education requirements, religious broadcast, and religious tolerance. In July the Ambassador hosted an iftar, which was well attended by local Muslim

leaders and welcomed among the Muslim community as an opportunity to discuss community development initiatives and how Muslim communities interacted with the country's Christian majority.