



## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Christians : **80.0%**
- Muslims : **13.5%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **5.8%**
- Others : **0.7%**

17,750,000

118,484 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Republic of Malawi lies on the border between southern Africa, which is predominantly Christian, and East Africa, a region where Islam has played a significant role for centuries. Freedom of religion is enshrined in the Malawian constitution.<sup>[1]</sup> Malawi's laws require religious communities to register with the authorities.<sup>[2]</sup> However, the religious beliefs and activities of these communities are not subject to state monitoring.

Religious instruction in primary schools is compulsory.<sup>[3]</sup> Depending on the faith or confessional affiliation of the pupils, this includes Bible studies or moral and religious education. According to the constitution, the curriculum should help overcome religious intolerance.<sup>[4]</sup> Malawi has many different religious educational institutions. They include not only schools sponsored by different denominations but also by radio and television stations. In Malawi, 12 radio stations and four television stations are run by religious communities. According to operating requirements, broadcasts must "not [be] offensive to the religious convictions of any section of the population".<sup>[5]</sup>

Prisoners have the right to receive the religious pastoral support of their choice.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Incidents

There were no constitutional amendments or serious incidents involving freedom of religion in Malawi during the period under review.

The Malawi Human Rights Commission investigated one case of alleged religious discrimination involving a pupil from a Rastafari family who broke school rules by having a Rasta hairstyle. The case is still pending.<sup>[7]</sup> How far Rastafari

customs should be accommodated, especially in schools, has concerned the Malawi Human Rights Commission for some time.<sup>[8]</sup>

Religious education has frequently been discussed in Malawi, often in response to complaints by Islamic communities who feel disadvantaged by the school system.<sup>[9]</sup>

Apart from this, there are mostly respectful relations between religions and other communities of believers in Malawi. For example, several faith communities participate in the Malawi Electoral Support Network.<sup>[10]</sup> This group, which addresses questions of human rights and political education, includes representatives from the Interfaith Public Affairs Committee, the Muslim Association of Malawi, the Quadria Muslim Association of Malawi, the Islamic Information Bureau, and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. Members of different communities of believers work together in other areas of economic and civilian life as well.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Prospects for freedom of religion

There are no indications to suggest that freedom of religion in Malawi is under major threat. That said, social tensions could have a negative effect on inter-faith relations.

According to the UNHCR, thousands of refugees have come to Malawi from Mozambique in recent years<sup>[12]</sup> fleeing fighting between the Mozambican government and rebels. The refugee situation deteriorated dramatically in early 2016. Although the situation improved last year, the task of providing long-term care for the refugees is problematic. As long as the Mozambique government fails to guarantee the safety of the returnees, they are likely to remain in Malawi.<sup>[13]</sup> The provision of care for refugees also presents a challenge for Malawi's Churches and religious communities in social as well as pastoral terms. Experience shows that religious tensions often worsen when different faith groups live in close proximity in extreme poverty.

## Endnotes / Sources

[1] Article 33 on 'Freedom of conscience', Constitution of the Republic of Malawi, World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), [http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file\\_id=218796](http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=218796), (accessed 2nd April 2018).

[2] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Malawi', International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 2nd April 2018).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] 'MESN Statement on the final report on the review of electoral laws and how the Malawi electoral commission is fairing on implementation of the agreed non-legislative electoral reforms', Malawi Electoral Support Network (MESN), 13th April 2017, <http://www.mesnmw.org>, (accessed 12th April 2018).

[11] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, op. cit.

[12] Kelvin Shimo (ed) and Tim Gaynor, 'Growing number of Mozambicans flee to Malawi', UNHCR, 16th March 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/3/56e91b486/growing-number-mozambicans-flee-malawi.html>, (accessed 11 February 2018), and 'Growing number of Mozambicans arriving in Malawi', UNHCR, 15th January 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/5698dbff6.html>, (accessed 2nd April 2018).

[13] Ibid.