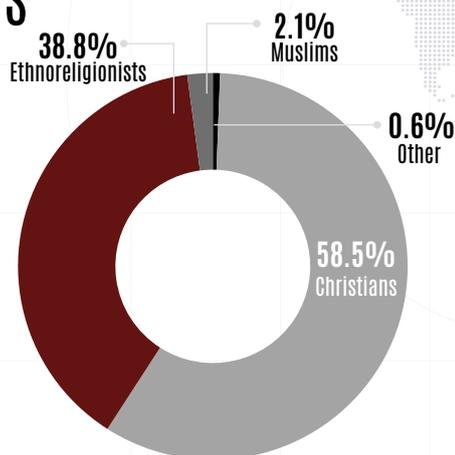




# MADAGASCAR

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Article 1 of the 2010 constitution<sup>1</sup> states that Madagascar is a secular state. Under Article 2, the concept of state neutrality towards all religions is presented as the basis of the separation between state and religion. No government official can hold a position of responsibility in a religious body. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by Articles 6 and 10.

Religious groups must register with the Ministry of the Interior. Tax exemption for religious groups can be requested in the case of foreign donations.<sup>2</sup> According to Madagascan law, in order to be legally registered as a religious entity, groups must have at least one hundred members and an elected council with a maximum of nine members, all of them Madagascan citizens. There are about 373 officially registered religious groups.<sup>3</sup>

Religious instruction is not included in the curriculum of public schools.<sup>4</sup>

A change in Madagascar's nationality law in 2017 enabled women to transmit their nationality to their chil-

dren, regardless of their marital status.<sup>5</sup> Since then, 1,360 nationality certificates have been issued.<sup>6</sup> The issue of stateless children disproportionately affected Muslim families.<sup>7</sup>

While being a secular state, politics and religion continue to be mixed.<sup>8</sup> During the 2019 general elections, many candidates used religion to appeal to voters. This was notable with two presidential candidates, Marc Ravalomanana and Davidson Andriamparany. Ravalomanana, who spoke at the closing ceremony marking the 50th anniversary of the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM),<sup>9</sup> has been accused of politicising the FJKM.

Another presidential candidate, Pastor André Mailhol, unites religion in his political campaign; politics and religion are understood as one and the same.<sup>10</sup>

In March 2019, the government issued a decree making Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, previously for Muslims only, paid national holidays.<sup>11</sup> Until recently, only Christian holy days such as Christmas or Easter were publicly recognised. The goal of this decision was to ensure an equal treatment of Madagascar's two main religions.<sup>12</sup>

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

In the last two years, Catholic Church properties have continued to suffer attack. In July 2018, a church was desecrated after somebody broke into it overnight, turning crosses upside down, smashing the figure of Jesus and throwing some liturgical objects to the floor, among other things.<sup>13</sup>

In February 2019, a priest was killed when he was returning home after bringing communion to a sick man. Reports say that his attackers had asked him for money before beating and shooting him.<sup>14</sup>

In September 2019, Pope Francis visited Madagascar during his apostolic journey to southern Africa. In his sermons, the pontiff addressed human rights violations in the region, as well as poverty and corruption.<sup>15</sup> Two hundred Muslims volunteered along with thousands of Catholics to prepare the arrival of the Pope.<sup>16</sup>

During an interview with Aid to the Church in Need in March 2020, the new Cardinal of Madagascar, Archbishop Désiré Tsarahazana of Toamasina, noted that an extremist form of Islam was “settling en masse in Madagascar”.<sup>17</sup> He also stated how “in the north they give money to women to wear the full veil, the burka, in streets, in order to advertise the expansion of Islam in the country.”<sup>18</sup>

Christians raised concerns about a new education plan that would reduce the number of years of basic education in denominational schools from twelve to nine years. They argued that since Catholic schools offer religious instruction after the ninth year, many of them would have to close, especially in rural areas.<sup>19</sup>

Some Muslims and Evangelical Christians complained that they were denied employment due to their religious affiliation.<sup>20</sup> The Muslim Malagasy Association, which claims to represent the country’s Muslim community, stated that having Arabic-sounding names made it harder for some Muslims to obtain identity papers. Furthermore, labour laws were not always respected, forcing some employees to work when they would normally attend religious services.<sup>21</sup>

In 2020, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, churches closed throughout the country.<sup>22</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Archbishop Désiré Tsarahazana, Pope Francis’s new Malagasy cardinal, has warned that “extremist Islam” is being imported into the country, particularly in the North.<sup>23</sup> He spoke about a plan to build 2,600 mosques in the island nation and pointed to poverty as the reason locals were converting to Islam, attracted by the money they would receive.<sup>24</sup> The impact of this situation on freedom of religion remains to be seen.

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