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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Uganda

[Covers the period from July 1, 2008, to June 30, 2009]

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government restricted religious groups it perceived as "cults." Unlike in the previous reporting period, there were no reports that local officials imposed restrictions on evening congregations.

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 93,000 square miles and a population of 31.3 million. According to official government figures, an estimated 85 percent of the population is Christian, 12 percent is Muslim, and the remaining 3 percent follow indigenous beliefs, Hinduism, Baha'ism, and Judaism. Some Muslims and Christians believe that the Muslim community is larger than the government numbers reflect. Of the Christian population, the Roman Catholic Church has the largest number of followers with 42 percent; the Anglican Church has an estimated 36 percent, and evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Orthodox Church members make up the rest. The Muslim population is primarily Sunni. Indigenous religious groups practice in some rural areas, occasionally blending their beliefs with or practicing them alongside Christianity or Islam. Indian nationals are the most significant immigrant population; members of this community are primarily Shi'a Muslim followers of the Aga Khan or practice Hinduism. The northern and West Nile regions are predominantly Catholic, while Iganga District in the east has the highest percentage of Muslims. The rest of the country has a mixture of religious affiliations.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Christmas.

The law prohibits the creation of political parties based on religion or other similar divisions.

The Government allows religious groups to obtain legal entity status under the Trustees Incorporation Act or the Companies Act. The Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, Anglican Church, and the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) all registered under this provision. The evangelical and Pentecostal churches, however, have opted to register with the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Board, which requires a yearly renewal. The NGO registration process takes at least six weeks; most religious organizations were granted permits. However, the NGO Board defers registration of some church groups for various reasons, including "cultism" and activities that the Board sees as undermining government programs. Registration with the NGO Board provides certification that allows churches to access donor funding.

As a result of previous "cult activity," the Government requires Kanungu District leaders recommend local community churches to the NGO Board before the Board can approve the churches' registrations.

In public schools, religious instruction is optional, and the curriculum covers academic study of world religious beliefs rather than instruction in one particular faith. Private madrassahs and Christian schools offer religious instruction and are common in the country.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government restricted religious groups it perceived as "cults." Unlike in the previous reporting period, local officials did not impose restrictions on evening congregations.

As in prior reporting periods, the Government continued to monitor the activities of groups it perceived as "cults," including the Serulanda Spiritual Foundation in Rakai District, New Heaven Church in Gulu, Rwengwara Healing Church of All Nations in Kabarole, and the Enjiri groups in Mbale and Luwero Districts. The NGO Board denied registration to the Enjiri group in Luwero and continued to defer on the Isa Messial Congregations' registrations. In April 2009 authorities in Kabarole District closed down Believers of River Jordan Church over alleged "cult" practices.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On March 28, 2009, police in Luwero District arrested eight members of the Enjiri religious group for holding an illegal gathering and "sabotaging" a government Universal Primary Education Program (UPE) in the district. The group reportedly withdrew their children from UPE schools because of religious objections to identifying their children with numbers. The suspects pleaded guilty, and the court sentenced each of them to eight months' imprisonment. In October 2007 police in Mbale arrested Enjiri "cult" leader Apollo Paulo Wazaba for similar reasons; however, his case was dismissed for lack of witnesses.

In May 2008 the Kamwenge Magistrates' Court dismissed the case against 11 members of the Nyangakaibo religious group, who were charged with holding an illegal assembly, after the prosecution failed to provide sufficient evidence.

In February 2008 police in Padar detained Severino Lukoya and three of his employees for two weeks for operating the unregistered New Malta Jerusalem Church. The Government continued to decline registration to the church throughout the reporting period, citing national security concerns. Lukoya is the father of Alice Lakwena, the former leader of the now-defunct Holy Spirit Movement, which had launched an armed rebellion against the Government.

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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

On June 6, 2009, police in Biharwe subcounty arrested four persons, including an army officer, and charged them with trespassing in connection with the demolishing of a Seventh-day Adventist church in the area. As of the end of the reporting period, the case was pending.

On August 24, 2008, the UMSC hosted Vatican Bishop Chidi Isizoh and a group of Christian youth from several African countries to encourage greater religious tolerance. The UMSC held discussions with the group under the theme "Youth Formation Interfaith in Africa." During the reporting period, the UMSC facilitated the establishment of human rights clubs in seven Muslim schools in the central region of the country. In addition, the UMSC sponsored a weekend program on a local Muslim faith-based radio station to promote religious pluralism.

The Program for Christian and Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA)-Uganda Chapter continued efforts to promote constructive engagement and peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims. Launched in 2003, PROCMURA-Uganda Chapter initiated dialogues and conducted sensitization workshops for youth and women. The chapter comprises members from the Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox Churches and the UMSC. Other religious groups, such as the Uganda Joint Christian Council and the Inter-Religious Council, also conducted activities to improve respect and tolerance among religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.
