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Burundi

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 10,747 square miles and its population is approximately 7.2 million. Although reliable statistics on the number of followers of various religions were not available, a Roman Catholic official estimated that 60 percent of the population was Catholic, with the largest concentration of adherents located in the center and south of the country. A Muslim leader estimated that up to 10 percent of the population was Muslim, the majority of whom lived in urban areas. The remainder of the population belonged to other Christian churches, practiced traditional indigenous religions, or had no religious affiliation. There were a number of small indigenous groups not affiliated with any major religion, some of which have won adherents by promising miracle cures for HIV/AIDS and other ailments.

Foreign missionary groups of many faiths were active in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution, promulgated on March 18, 2005, provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. Discrimination on the basis of religious conviction is prohibited. A 1992 law covering nonprofit organizations, including religious groups, is the basis for the recognition and registration of religious bodies.

There is no state religion. The Catholic Church, which represents approximately 60 percent of the population, is predominant.

The Government requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of the Interior. Each association with a religious nature must file the following with the ministry: the denomination or affiliation of the religious institution, a copy of its statutes, the address of its headquarters in the country, an address abroad if the local religious institution is a subsidiary, and information about the association's governing body and legal representative. If an association with a religious character fails to register with the ministry, its representative is reminded of the requirement to do so. If the representative does not comply, the place of worship or association is instructed to close down. If it does not close down when ordered to do so, the representative of the religious institution or association can be jailed for six months to five years.

The Government requires that religious groups maintain a headquarters in the country.

While there is no law that accords tax exemptions to religious groups, the Government often waives taxes on imported religious articles used by religious institutions and also often waives taxes on the importation by religious institutions of goods destined for social development purposes. These exemptions are negotiated with the Finance Ministry on a case-by-case basis, and there is no indication of religious bias in the awarding of such exemptions.

The heads of major religious organizations are accorded diplomatic status. Foreign missionary groups openly promote their religious beliefs. The Government has welcomed their development assistance.

The Government recognizes Catholic holy days, including the Assumption, the Ascension, All Saints' Day, and Christmas. In 2005 the Government also officially recognized the Muslim holy day Eid al-Fitr.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were no known abuses of religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

On June 16, 2005 members of the PALIPEHUTU-FNL killed five civilians taking part in a religious service in Bujumbura Rural Province, and at least ten persons were wounded by grenades and gunfire.

In October 2004 in Makamba Province, armed assailants shot and killed Catholic priest Gerard Nzeyimana. According to press reports, Nzeyimana was specifically targeted; the killers reportedly verified his identity before killing him. Catholic World News reported that Nzeyimana was killed for his stance against human rights abuses; a news report from the Fides Agency quoted sources that identified the killers as PALIPEHUTU-FNL rebels.

In August 2004 the PALIPEHUTU-FNL rebels reportedly captured a twenty member delegation headed by Anglican Bishop Pie Ntukamazina in Kabezi Commune, Bujumbura Rural Province. Government forces rescued the delegation the same day. The motive for the capture was not known.

In July 2004 Dieudonne Hakizimana, a Party for the Liberation of the Hutu People-National Liberation Force (PALIPEHUTU-FNL) rebel who reportedly admitted to taking part in the December 2003 killing of Papal Nuncio Michael Courtney, died in government custody, reportedly from wounds sustained prior to his capture on February 1, 2004.

In December 2003 unknown assailants killed Papal Nuncio Michael Courtney near Minago, Bujumbura Rural Province. The motive for the attack is unknown; there is no indication that the attack was motivated by the religious affiliation of the victim.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials also maintain regular contact with leaders and members of various religious communities. The embassy has supported Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant groups in the fields of health, education, and conflict resolution. It appears that the program has been instrumental in resolving disputes within religious communities, the latest illustration being elections to choose the Burundian Muslim spiritual leader. In addition, the embassy funded a range of human rights and democracy programs supporting religious and civil society organizations.

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