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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uganda

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and stipulates there shall be no state religion. It provides for freedom of belief, the right to practice and promote any religion, and the right to belong to and participate in the practices of any religious organization in a manner consistent with the constitution. The government requires religious groups to register. The Computer Misuse Amendment Act criminalizes as hate speech forms of expression that “ridicule, degrade, or demean” individuals based on their religion.

In June, security agents forced their way into the residence of Muslim cleric Sheikh Yunus Kamoga, whom they accused of “unlawfully detaining over 40 individuals for purposes of religious indoctrination.” The agents assaulted and arrested at least 45 persons during the raid. Kamoga stated the arrested individuals were receiving religious training and decried the violence against his followers; police later took disciplinary action against the officers involved in the incident, and the Minister of Internal Security criticized police for “profiling” members of the Muslim community as terrorists. In February, police in Butaleja District arrested nine Muslims due to their alleged association with the extremist Allied Democratic Forces (ADF, aka ISIS-DRC or ISIS-Central Africa) group. In 2021, the State Department designated the ADF as a foreign terrorist organization. Police said the arrested individuals included the spouses and relatives of alleged ADF members, although the arrested individuals and community members denied the linkage.

ISIS-affiliated ADF militants conducted several attacks, including an attack in June at a predominantly Christian school during which they killed 37 pupils and six other persons, and an ambush in which they killed two foreign tourists and their Ugandan guide in a national park in October e. Following the school attack in Mpondwe near the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, media outlets reported members of the local Muslim communities feared reprisals. Media sources said the ADF frequently targeted Christians in its propaganda. Suspected ADF operatives made several unsuccessful attempts during the year to set off bombs inside churches.

The U.S. Ambassador met with President Yoweri Museveni and highlighted the importance of ensuring respect for human rights, including freedom of religion or belief on multiple occasions. The Ambassador and other embassy officials engaged leaders in the Jewish, Muslim, and evangelical communities as well as the Anglican Church to underscore U.S. government support for religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of Uganda to be 47.7 million (midyear 2023). According to the most recent government census, conducted in 2014, 82 percent of the population is Christian. The largest Christian group is Roman Catholic at 39 percent, followed by Anglican at 32 percent, and Pentecostal Christians at 11 percent. The census reports Muslims constitute 14 percent of the population. The Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) states Muslims are closer to 35 percent of the population. The majority of Muslims are Sunni, although there are reportedly a small number of Shia Muslims, mostly in Kampala and the eastern part of the country, particularly in the Mayuge and Bugiri Districts. Other religious groups, which collectively

constitute less than 5 percent of the population, include Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Orthodox Christians, Hindus, Jews, Baha'is, adherents of Indigenous beliefs, and those with no religious affiliation.

According to the Indian Association in Uganda, the largest non-African ethnic population is of Indian origin or descent, most of whom are Hindu.

The Jewish community estimates it has between 2,000 and 3,000 members and is mainly concentrated in Mbale Town in the eastern region of the country. Religious groups are generally dispersed evenly across the country, although there are large concentrations of Muslims in the eastern, central, and northwestern parts of the country.

SECTION II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and proclaims there shall be no state religion. It provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the right to practice and promote any religion, as well as to belong to and participate in the practices of any religious body or organization in a manner consistent with the constitution. However, the constitution also stipulates that these rights and freedoms are subject to limitations intended to protect other persons' rights or the "public interest." The constitution also states that limitations imposed in the "public interest" cannot go beyond what is "acceptable and demonstrably justifiable in a free and democratic society or what is provided in this constitution." The constitution prohibits the creation of political parties based on religion.

The penal code includes blasphemy laws that criminalize conduct deemed an "insult to religion," a "disturbance of religious gatherings," or "wounding religious feelings." The penal code also criminalizes the persecution of "any group or body of persons on account of religion."

The Computer Misuse Amendment Act criminalizes online hate speech, including forms of expression that "ridicule, degrade, or demean" individuals based on their religion. It also prohibits conduct intended to foment religious divisions or promote hostility against any person on account of his or her religion. Persons convicted of breaching such provisions are subject to a maximum penalty of 15 million shillings (\$4,000) or seven years' imprisonment.

The country's coat of arms bears the motto "For God and My Country." The law prohibits secular broadcasters from stating opinions on religious doctrine or faith. The law also prohibits radio and television stations from broadcasting advertisements that "promote psychic practices or practices related to the occult," material that encourages persons to change their faith, and content that uses or contains blasphemy, which is not defined by law. The government, however, seldom enforces these provisions.

The Nongovernmental Organizations (NGO) Act states religious organizations and groups are obligated to register with the Uganda Registration Services Bureau and secure a five-year operating license from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Bureau requires religious organizations to provide a written copy of a board resolution creating the religious organization; a copy of the organization's Memorandum of Association and Articles of Association spelling out the organization's objectives and purposes; a record of the organization's directorship and shareholdings; copies of the national identity cards of the directors, as well as a copy of a land title or proof of ownership of any property owned by the organization.

Under the Income Tax Act of 2000, religious institutions and their nonprofit activities are exempted from direct taxes but are liable for indirect taxes.

The National Environment (Noise Standards and Control) Regulations of 2003 prescribe permissible levels of sound that may be produced by any person or body.

Primary schools must teach either Christianity, Islam, or both in their social studies classes. Many schools teach both and allow students to select which religion class to attend. Religious instruction in public schools is optional at the post-primary level. Secondary schools may choose which, if any, religious studies to incorporate into their curricula, and students must take the course offered regardless of personal religious affiliation. Primary school students may choose to answer questions about either Islam or Christianity during the religion portion of the national social studies exams. The state has separate curricula for world religions, including Christianity and Islam, and all schools must adhere to the state-approved curriculum for each religion they choose to teach.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

Members of the Muslim community reported security agencies conducted operations intended to counter extremist violence in discriminatory ways that profiled Muslims and unduly subjected them to arrest, physical abuse, and detention without trial. In June, security agents forced their way into the residence of a renowned Muslim cleric, Sheikh Yunus Kamoga, whom they accused of “unlawfully detaining over 40 individuals for purposes of religious indoctrination.” The agents assaulted and arrested at least 45 persons during the raid. Kamoga stated the arrested individuals, who were later released, were receiving legitimate religious training and decried “the senseless violence” meted out to them, as well as his “endless harassment by security agents.” Police stated in June they had suspended 13 officers and further disciplinary action was pending against the officers who stormed Kamoga’s house. In June, following the police statement, Minister for Internal Affairs Kahinda Otafiire criticized police for “profiling” members of the Muslim community as terrorists, terming the practice “insane” and directing them to curb it.

In June, police arrested over 20 members of the Muslim community in Butaleja District, Eastern Uganda, for alleged collaboration with the ADF. None of the arrested individuals had been arraigned by the end of the year, and it remained unclear whether the arrested individuals still faced charges or had been released.

In February, police in Butaleja District, Eastern Uganda, arrested nine Muslims on account of their alleged association with the ADF. Police said the arrested individuals included the spouses and relatives of alleged ADF members, although the arrested individuals and community members denied the linkage. The UMSC stated the arrests were driven by the government’s attempts to profile Muslims as terrorists and ADF members.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

Observers stated the government often enforced registration requirements of the NGO Act on new religious groups. It, however, did not strictly enforce the act’s requirements on larger and more traditionally established religious groups such as Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, and Seventh-day Adventist groups, and the UMSC.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

In June, the government requested and arranged the deportation from Ethiopia of 80 Ugandan members of a religious group, the Christ Disciples Church, who had travelled to Ethiopia early in

the year, in anticipation of the predicted end of the world and in the belief, espoused by their pastor, that they would find salvation through starvation. An additional group of 90 Church members were repatriated from Kenya while enroute to Ethiopia. The Ugandan government described the group as a “cult” and launched a manhunt for the group’s leader, Pastor Simon Opolot, who was reportedly still in hiding at year’s end.

The government enforced regulations on noise pollution in ways that appeared to discriminate against evangelical religious bodies, according to evangelical leaders. In February, the government issued a warning that bars, clubs, religious places of worship, and other places that hosted public gatherings risked closure if they emitted noise beyond the levels permissible under the law. Evangelical religious leaders under the umbrella group Born Again Faith Uganda (BAFU) stated since then, authorities enforced the regulation irregularly, with evangelical churches and street preachers particularly targeted for closure, while bars and other nonreligious operators were allowed to produce noise levels well above the permissible limit.

In August, the Resident District Commissioner in Lyantonde District in southwestern Uganda, issued “guidelines” restricting evangelical church activities in the district. Under the guidelines, evangelical churches, as well as all other churches, were barred from holding any prayers after 9:00 p.m. “in order to respect other people’s right to sleep.” In practice, only evangelical churches had services that continued after 9:00 p.m. The guidelines also required all evangelical churches procure letters of recommendation from BAFU before engaging in any activities. In September, BAFU stated the guidelines were discriminatory and an infringement on evangelical churches’ freedom of worship.

In January, the UMSC stated the government continued to exercise “excessive scrutiny” of Muslim religious schools (madrassahs) on suspicion that the schools were used to train terrorists, and this had severely restricted the operations of such schools. The UMSC accused security agents of routinely surveilling madrassahs and their leaders, frequently summoning the latter to report to police and indicate the identities of their students and explain various activities at the madrassahs.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

In September, the Uganda Muslim Lawyers Association (UMLA) stated it had received at least 11 complaints involving instances in which security agents profiled members of the Muslim community as terror suspects, arresting and detaining them for durations beyond the legally prescribed limit of 48 hours before releasing them without charge. At least six members of the Muslim community were arrested at various mosques and detained incommunicado at facilities without legal mandates for detention before being released. UMLA stated some of the arrested individuals had been tortured.

UMLA also stated female members of the Muslim community were often forced to remove their head scarves when appearing before governmental agencies for purposes of acquiring passports or national identity cards. The Uganda Law Council (a governmental body responsible for registering legal practitioners) did not allow female Muslim lawyers to appear in court while wearing a head scarf. UMLA said a 2022 appeal against the Uganda Law Council prohibition remained pending in the courts at the end of the year.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On June 16, ADF militants attacked the predominantly Christian Lhubiriha Secondary School in Mpondwe, near the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with guns and machetes, killing 37 pupils and six villagers. The terrorists looted the buildings and burned down the boys’

dormitory. They also abducted six pupils, some of whom were later rescued by the army. Media outlets reported members of the local Muslim community feared reprisals after the attack.

In October, ISIS-affiliated ADF militants ambushed and killed two foreign tourists, Emmaretia Geyer and David Barlow, and their Ugandan tour guide, Eric Alyai, while they were on safari in Queen Elizabeth National Park. Security forces tracked and killed several ADF fighters believed to be involved in the attack, and in November, they arrested Abdul Rashid Kyoto, described as an ADF commander, on terrorism charges related to the killings.

Suspected ADF operatives made several unsuccessful attempts to set off bombs inside churches during the year. In September, authorities in Kampala detained a man with a bomb in a backpack outside the crowded Lubaga Miracle Centre Cathedral on a Sunday. On October 15, authorities prevented the ADF from bombing two churches in central Kibbi, approximately 31 miles west of Kampala, according to local media reporting. The bombs were sent to pastors disguised as gifts, but members of the public noticed the devices and alerted police. Media sources noted the ADF frequently targeted Christians in its propaganda.

Throughout the year, Prince Kassim Nakibinge, the titular head of the Muslim community and a member of the largest royal family in the country, held a series of meetings aimed at reconciling rival factions of the Muslim community.

Section IV.

U.S Government Policy and Engagement

At several meetings throughout the year, the U.S. Ambassador discussed the importance of protecting human rights, including religious freedom or belief, with President Museveni.

In March, the Ambassador attended a lunch that Prince Nakibinge hosted, where she commended him for his efforts to unite Ugandans across different religions and for supporting embassy programs aimed at promoting freedom of religion.

Embassy officials also engaged different religious communities, including the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (the umbrella body of religious leaders of different faiths from across the country), the Muslim, Jewish and evangelical communities as well as the Anglican Church, underscoring the importance of upholding religious tolerance as a means of promoting social cohesion.