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2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Rwanda

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of religion and worship. The law requires religious groups and faith-based organizations (FBOs) to obtain legal status before beginning operations. It also calls for legal representatives of FBOs and preachers with supervisory responsibilities to hold academic degrees. During the year, the government allowed a small number of the more than 6,000 churches, mosques, and other places of worship that had remained closed since 2018 for violating health and safety standards or noise pollution ordinances to reopen after they made required infrastructure improvements. Government officials stated that time and resource constraints prevented many religious groups from bringing their places of worship into compliance with government requirements during the year. Civil society and religious leaders noted that the required improvements were often prohibitively expensive for religious groups of modest means (which constituted the majority), and that the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic had depleted their financial resources. Following engagement with the Jehovah's Witnesses, the government amended the law and eliminated a requirement that civil servants and teachers swear an oath of allegiance to the country as a condition of employment. Jehovah's Witnesses had long sought this change on the grounds that the oath requirement violated their religious beliefs.

Religious leaders stated numerous faith-based groups and associations contributed to greater understanding and tolerance by participating in interfaith meetings, organizing activities under the auspices of an interfaith religious leaders' forum, and collaborating on community development projects.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy representatives engaged the government to discuss the FBO law and its implementation. Embassy representatives consulted with religious groups and FBOs on continued challenges in meeting government requirements for reopening places of worship. Embassy representatives also urged the government to communicate clearly to religious groups the infrastructure improvements that were required and allow flexibility in working to reopen places of worship. The Ambassador and embassy representatives also discussed with religious organizations the impact of COVID-19 on their communities and how they could help communities deal with challenges posed by the pandemic. The embassy engaged religious groups virtually and emphasized the importance of interfaith dialogue and mutual support, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12.7 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2012 census, the population is 44 percent Catholic; 38 percent Protestant, including Anglican, Pentecostal, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, and evangelical Christian churches; 12 percent Seventh-day Adventist; 2 percent Muslim; and 0.7 percent Jehovah's Witnesses. Several other small religious groups, together constituting less than 1 percent of the population, include animists, Baha'is, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and a small Jewish community consisting entirely of foreigners. Approximately 2.5 percent of the population holds no religious beliefs. The head office of the Rwanda Muslim Community (RMC) stated Muslims could constitute as much as 12 to 15 percent of the population. The majority of Muslims are Sunni, with a small number of Shia (200-300), according to the RMC. While generally there are no concentrations of religious groups in certain geographic areas, a significant number of Muslims live in the Nyamirambo neighborhood of Kigali.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, religion, worship, and public manifestation thereof even when the government declares a state of emergency. Exercising these rights may be subject to limitations to ensure respect of others' rights and good morals, public order, and social welfare. The constitution bars political parties based on religious affiliation. The penal code stipulates religious discrimination is punishable by five to seven years in prison and fines of 100,000 to 1,000,000 Rwandan francs (\$110 to \$1,100).

Under the law determining the organization and functioning of FBOs, which include religious groups and nongovernmental organizations associated with religious groups, any organization, umbrella organization, or ministry that intends to begin operations must obtain legal status from the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB). According to the law, an FBO must submit the following to obtain legal status: an application letter addressed to the RGB; notarized statutes governing its organization; the address of its head office and the names of its legal representative and deputy, their duties, full address, and criminal records; a document certifying the legal representative and deputy were appointed in accordance with its statutes; a brief notarized statement explaining its doctrine; a notarized declaration of the legal representatives of the organization of consent to the responsibilities assigned to them; notarized minutes of the group’s general assembly that established the organization, approved its statutes, and appointed members of its organs; a notarized document describing the organization’s annual action plan and source of funding; a document indicating the building that meets the requirements of the building code of the area of operation; a letter issued by district authorities agreeing to collaborate with the organization; a partnership document issued by an umbrella organization of the organization’s choosing; and proof of payment of a nonrefundable application fee. The law states the RGB must either issue a certificate of legal personality within 60 days of the date of receipt of the application or, in case of denial, send a written notice explaining the reasons for the denial within 30 days of the date of receipt of the application. Under the law, FBOs that already held legal personality as of September 10, 2018, when the current law was passed, were not required to reapply but had to harmonize their functioning and statutes with the current law and submit the revised statutes to the RGB within 12 months of the law’s enactment.

Under the law, if the RGB denies an FBO’s application for legal status, the group may reapply when the reason for denial no longer exists.

The law stipulates that preachers with supervisory responsibilities must possess a degree in religious studies from an institution of higher learning or any other degree with a valid certificate in religious studies issued by a recognized institution. The law also requires that an FBO’s legal representative hold a degree from an institution of higher learning. The law states that persons required to hold an academic degree shall have five years from the date of the law’s enactment to comply with the requirement.

The law establishes fines of one to two million francs (\$1,100 to \$2,100) and imprisonment from one to two years for any individual who obstructs the practice of religious rituals. The law also prohibits public defamation of rituals, symbols, and “religious cult objects.” The penalty is imprisonment for a term of not less than 15 days but less than three months and a fine of 100,000 to 200,000 francs (\$110 to \$210), or only one of these penalties.

The law regulates public meetings and states that any person who holds a meeting or demonstration in a public place without prior authorization is subject to eight days’ to six months’ imprisonment, a fine of 100,000 to 1,000,000 francs (\$110 to \$1,100), or both. Penalties increase if the illegal meeting or demonstration is found to have threatened security, public order, or health. The law states that religious sermons must be delivered in designated facilities that meet the requirements of the law and that if an FBO intends to organize a special public gathering, it must seek authorization from the competent authority.

Under the law, FBOs are prohibited from causing noise pollution. Offenders are subject to a fine of 100,000 to 1,000,000 francs (\$110 to \$1,100), and repeat offenders are subject to increased fines and up to one month’s imprisonment. By law, groups may not use their faith, religious practices, and preaching to jeopardize national unity, peace and security, public order and health, good morals, good conduct, freedom, or the fundamental rights of others.

Students in public primary school and the first three years of secondary education must take a survey class on world religions, ethics, and citizenship. The Ministry of Education establishes the curriculum. The law does not specify either opt-out provisions or penalties for not taking part in the class. The law allows parents to enroll their children in private religious schools.

The government subsidizes some schools affiliated with religious groups. A presidential order guarantees students attending any government-subsidized school the right to worship according to their beliefs during the school day, as long as their religious groups are registered in the country and the students’ worship practices do not interfere with learning and teaching activities. The order does not stipulate any procedure for arranging special accommodations.

The law states FBOs may give their opinions on social or faith-related matters but may not engage in political activities to gain political power, organize debates to support political organizations or political candidates, or use any other means to support candidates for any public office.

Every foreign missionary must have a temporary resident permit and a foreign identity card. Specific requirements to obtain the permit (which is valid for two years and renewable) include a signed curriculum vitae, an original police clearance from the country of prior residence, an authorization letter from the parent organization, and a fee of 100,000 francs (\$110).

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

Government Practices

During the year, many places of worship remained closed because they failed to make government-mandated infrastructure improvements to address health and safety standards or noise pollution ordinances. Government officials stated that these requirements were necessary to protect the health of worshippers and said that while some places of worship had been closed, religious organizations were not prohibited from operating. They stated that time and resource constraints prevented many religious groups from bringing their places of worship into compliance with government requirements during the year, and added that many religious groups made arrangements to worship elsewhere until they could make improvements to their facilities. Of the 8,760 places of worship that were closed in 2018, the government reported 2,016 were allowed to reopen as of December 2019 after making required improvements. An additional 215 places of worship were allowed to reopen during the year after making required improvements.

Civil society and religious leaders reported that most places of worship that were not in compliance in 2019 continued to be out of compliance during the year and thus remained closed. They stated the required improvements were often prohibitively expensive for organizations of modest means (which constituted the majority) and that the economic effects of COVID-19 had left them with limited resources to make improvements.

Religious leaders said the same requirements applied to places of worship in both urban and rural areas and that the government applied the same infrastructure improvement requirements in urban and rural areas without regard for the level of economic development in the area. Religious leaders raised concerns that long-term closures of places of worship would negatively affect education and economic development in their communities because FBOs and religious groups often sponsored schools and provided access to finance through lending groups or banking services.

Media reported several cases in which local officials broke up groups that had gathered to pray in homes or in caves in contravention of COVID-19-related government prohibitions on mass gatherings, including those for religious purposes. In July, the government announced that places of worship could resume holding services after implementing COVID-19 preventive measures and obtaining approval from local authorities. Government officials stated that the government coordinated closely with religious leaders to develop guidelines on hand washing, physical distancing, and other safe practices that would allow for the resumption of services. Government and religious group representatives reported that many groups resumed services in line with these guidelines, although some groups in rural areas found meeting the requirements difficult.

In August, the government eliminated a requirement in the law mandating that civil servants and teachers swear an oath of allegiance to the country as a condition of employment. Jehovah's Witnesses had long sought this change on the grounds that the oath requirement violated their religious beliefs and constituted a major barrier to employment. The amended law requires an oath only for elected offices. Jehovah's Witnesses noted parliamentary debate on the issue featured parliamentarians advocating for the law to be changed to make it more inclusive of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Government officials presiding over wedding ceremonies generally required couples to comply with the legal requirement that they take a pledge while touching the national flag, which ran counter to Jehovah's Witnesses' religious beliefs. The government sought to accommodate Jehovah's Witnesses by allowing them to request modified wedding ceremonies without the flag pledge, although many couples reportedly faced delays arranging a ceremony with that special accommodation.

Jehovah's Witnesses students faced sporadic challenges with respect to military and patriotic activities and certain religious services at school. Although the law protects students' rights not to participate in these activities, Jehovah's Witnesses stated that some school administrators of both public and religious schools were not aware of or did not enforce those protections.

Civil society leaders reported that the government pressured prominent religious leaders to be “positive” personalities and refrain from making statements in conflict with government policies.

Muslim community leaders stated that they maintained a collaborative relationship with the National Police and continued to work to combat extremism and radicalization in the Muslim community. Leaders said that they conducted training throughout the year to educate young Muslims about the dangers of extremism.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders said numerous religious groups and associations contributed to greater religious understanding and tolerance by participating in interfaith activities and collaborating on public awareness campaigns. During the year, the Rwanda Religious Leaders Forum (RRLF), an organization under the joint leadership of the Grand Mufti of Rwanda and Protestant, Catholic, Anglican, and evangelical Christian leaders, continued to pursue its stated aim of strengthening interfaith collaboration on education, combating gender-based violence, and promoting socioeconomic development, unity, and reconciliation. The RRLF also made public statements advocating for reopening places of worship after the nationwide COVID-19 lockdown and worked with the government to develop parameters under which religious services could resume.

Observers said religious organizations played a crucial role in meeting the humanitarian needs of poor and vulnerable citizens most affected by COVID-19.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives continued to engage with government officials and religious organizations on the FBO law and its implementation. Embassy representatives discussed the law with government officials and encouraged the government to maintain clear channels of communication with religious groups and FBOs. Embassy representatives urged the government to be flexible in the application of government regulations and to work with religious groups and FBOs to reopen places of worship. Embassy representatives closely monitored whether COVID-19-related enforcement of public health directives affecting religious groups were applied consistently across all parts of society.

The embassy hosted interfaith discussions focused on religious diversity and how faith groups could help their communities cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. In October, the Ambassador hosted a virtual roundtable with representatives of Catholic, Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Muslim communities. The groups discussed the importance of interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance and highlighted the benefits of interfaith cooperation for the country.

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