

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	395
Land:	Uganda
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uganda
Udgivet:	12. maj 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	21. maj 2021

Document #2051726

USDOS – US Department of State

2020 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 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. Between May 18 and May 29, Chieftaincy of Military Intelligence (CMI) officers arrested six Muslim clerics in Masaka District and accused them of running a cell operated by the ISIS-linked armed group Allied Democratic Front. The security forces continued to hold the clerics without trial at year's end. On July 5, the Uganda Police Force (UPF) evicted leaders of the Salafi-associated Tabliq Muslim group from a mosque in Kampala and arrested seven of its clerics before restoring management of the mosque to the largest Sunni umbrella organization, the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC). Police released the clerics on July 12 after a court order. On March 28, police arrested evangelical Christian minister Augustine Yiga after he questioned government messaging on COVID-19. The court released him on bail on May 5 and restricted him from making any public statements regarding COVID-19. Some religious leaders said that the government discriminated against religious institutions when it relaxed restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19, allowing businesses and public transport to operate but denying permission to religious institutions to reopen at the same time. The UMSC stated the government continued to discriminate against Muslims when distributing national resources and hiring for public positions.

In October, Born Again Faith Uganda (BAFU), an umbrella organization of evangelical churches, reported members of opposing faiths – who did not want to have evangelical churches in their communities – complained of noise pollution from the churches to local leaders, who then evicted churches from the communities.

U.S. embassy representatives regularly discussed religious freedom issues with government officials. On April 30, the Charge d'Affaires held discussions with Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda and encouraged the government to enforce measures to combat COVID-19 without violating human rights. Embassy representatives engaged local government officials in the eastern part of the country to promote religious tolerance. Embassy representatives met with leaders of Sunni umbrella organizations, including UMSC and the Kibuli Order of the Supreme Mufti, Nadwa (a coalition of Muslim scholars), Scholars Forum, and Tabliq imams, to promote religious tolerance, education, and peacebuilding in the country. To mark the start of Ramadan in April, the Charge d'Affaires used the embassy's social media platforms to promote religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 42.3 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the most recent census, conducted in 2014, 82 percent of the population is Christian. The largest Christian group is Roman Catholic with 39 percent; 32 percent of the population is Anglican, and 11 percent is Pentecostal Christian. According to official government estimates, Muslims constitute 14 percent of the population. The UMSC estimates Muslims (primarily Sunni) are closer to 35 percent of the population. There is also 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, adherents of indigenous beliefs, Baptists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Orthodox Christians, Hindus, Jews, Baha'is, 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 of approximately 2,000 members is mainly concentrated in Mbale Town, in the eastern region of the country. Generally, religious groups are dispersed evenly across the country, although there are concentrations of Muslims in the eastern and northern parts of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and establishes 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. The constitution also stipulates the government may limit these rights by measures that are “reasonably justifiable for dealing with a state of emergency.” The constitution prohibits the creation of political parties based on religion.

The penal code criminalizes “disturbance of religious gatherings” and “wounding religious feelings.”

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 of the law.

The government requires religious groups to register to obtain legal entity status. The government requires religious groups to register as nonprofit organizations with the Uganda Registration Services Bureau and then secure a five-year operating license from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The bureau requires faith-based organizations to provide a copy of a land title or proof of ownership of premises, a copy of the board resolution to start a faith-based organization, a copy of the memorandum and articles of association spelling out what the organization intends to do, allotment of shareholding, and copies of the national identity cards of the directors. The government does not require the larger and more historically established religious groups – including the Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches and the UMSC – to obtain an operating license.

The Income Tax Act exempts registered religious groups and their nonprofit activities from direct taxation.

Religious instruction in public schools is optional at the postprimary level. Primary schools must teach either Christianity, Islam, or both in their social studies classes. Many schools teach both and allow students to select which to attend. Secondary schools may choose which, if any, religious studies to incorporate into their curricula, and students who choose to attend that school must take the course offered. 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 a number of world religions, including Christianity and Islam, and all schools must adhere to the state-approved curriculum for each religion they choose to teach. The majority of students in the country attend schools run by religious organizations.

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

Government Practices

On June 1, local media reported that between May 18 and May 29, unidentified plainclothes security officers arrested six Muslim clerics in Masaka District. According to local media, the security officers carried out a search of the detainees’ houses and confiscated documents and a motorcycle. According to local media, the Uganda Peoples’ Defence Forces and the UPF denied knowledge of the arrest. On July 7, local media reported the CMI arrested the six on suspicion that they ran a cell on behalf of the Allied Democratic Front, an armed Islamist insurgent group originating in the country but operating primarily in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since the 1990s. The six remained in custody without trial at year’s end.

On July 5, UPF officers, assisted by Local Defence Unit members, surrounded the Masjid Noor mosque in Kampala, evicted its leadership, and arrested seven clerics. The UPF stated it had deployed its officers to “provide security for the smooth handover and takeover of the properties by the rightful owners.” The UPF said it arrested the seven on accusations of obstruction of justice and corruption. The UPF evicted the Salafi Tabliq leaders who had run the mosque since 2012 and returned it to the UMSC. On July 10, the UMSC said it repossessed the mosque after the Tabliq used the mosque to spread hate speech and defaulted on rent payments for the mosque. On July 12, local media reported the UPF released the seven clerics in compliance with a court order.

On March 28, the UPF arrested evangelical Christian minister Augustine Yiga for spreading “misleading information about the COVID-19 pandemic.” On March 27, Yiga appeared on a program on his church’s television station, ABS TV, and said COVID-19 did not exist in the country, contrary to the government’s public health messaging. On March 30, the government charged Yiga with “an act likely to spread infection of disease,” and the court remanded him to Kitalya Prison. On May 5, the court granted Yiga bail and prohibited him from making any public comments about COVID-19. According to local media, Yiga died of natural causes before the case could proceed.

On March 18, the government announced restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19, which included cancellation of all public meetings, including religious gatherings, and closure of all schools. Some evangelical Protestant ministers said the government’s suspension of all religious gatherings, as part of measures to combat COVID-19, infringed on their religious freedom. On September 20, the government lifted the suspension on religious gatherings but limited attendance to 70 persons. On June 19, lawyers associated with Zoe Ministries in Kampala said the government did not consult religious organizations regarding the suspension, which they said amounted to religious persecution. President Yoweri Museveni, however, said the government consulted with the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda, a body representing the largest faiths in the country, before making the announcement. The Uganda Muslim Youth Development Forum (UMYDF) said the government’s actions to block Muslims from collecting and distributing food charity during Ramadan, as part of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, violated their

religious freedom. The UMYDF said the government directed all donations be deposited with government’s National COVID-19 Relief Taskforce, which would then distribute the donations to Muslims in a manner that would not expose the public to COVID-19. According to UMYDF, the taskforce failed to deliver relief to Muslim communities, which it said was because it did not know the location of the communities in need.

In October, BAFU, an umbrella body of evangelical churches, and UMYDF said the government discriminated against religious institutions as it relaxed COVID-19 restrictions. The government gradually relaxed restrictions on businesses and public transport starting on May 4 through August but maintained the restrictions on religious gatherings, foreign travel, and schools until September 20. BAFU national coordinator Bishop Herbert Buyondo said the government decision to reopen markets, shops, and restaurants “without giving people an opportunity to worship, was a violation of their religious freedom.”

In October, UMSC representatives stated the government continued to use the census figures as justification for discrimination against Muslims in appointments to public positions and in the deployment of social programs. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to report sections of the Muslim population believed the government singled out Muslims as potential perpetrators of high-profile crimes and often arrested them without evidence. The NGOs reported that prolonged detention without trial, torture, and inhuman treatment of Muslim suspects by government security agencies continued.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In October, BAFU reported members of other faiths – who did not want to have evangelical Christian churches in their communities – complained of noise pollution from the churches to local leaders, who then evicted churches from the communities. Local contacts noted that similar complaints occurred sporadically across the country, particularly with regard to evangelical churches with powerful sound systems.

Observers noted a large billboard placed off Entebbe Road, near Kampala, stating “Muslims are of Satan and the enemy of all Christians and Jews.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives regularly discussed religious freedom issues with government officials. On April 30, the Charge d’Affaires held discussions with Prime Minister Rugunda and encouraged the country to enforce COVID-19 countermeasures without violating human rights.

Embassy representatives also regularly engaged with religious leaders on social, development, and civic engagement issues. Embassy representatives met with leaders of Sunni umbrella organizations, including UMSC and the Kibuli Order of the Supreme Mufti, Nadwa (a coalition of Muslim scholars), Scholars Forum, and Tabliq imams, to promote religious tolerance, education, and peacebuilding in the country. Embassy representatives engaged in outreach routinely in Kampala, and in October in the eastern region with the Uganda Human Rights Commission, Muslim Clerics of Uganda Development Initiative, and the Islamic University of Uganda in Mbale.

On September 28, the embassy used social media to publicize continued U.S. engagement and cooperation with the Muslim community, which was generally positively received. To mark the start of Ramadan in April, the Charge d’Affaires used the embassy’s social media platforms to promote religious tolerance.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2020)

Country:

Uganda

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State](#)

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/uganda/>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:
12 May 2021

Document ID:
2051726

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