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2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Burundi

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the state as secular, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for freedom of conscience and religion. It prohibits political parties from preaching religious violence or hate. Laws regulating religious groups require registration with the Ministry of the Interior, and religious groups must meet standards including a minimum number of adherents in order to seek registration. Government officials expressed support for the former head of the Seventh-day Adventist Church – at the time a government official – who was ousted by the Church in November 2018 for alleged embezzlement. Police briefly detained the new head of the Church and some of his followers in May and arrested him again in October, beating some of his followers during a demonstration that same month. He remained in detention at year’s end without formal charges. The Ministry of the Interior reduced membership in the Body for the Regulation and Conciliation of Religious Confessions from 11 members to eight, of whom five were religious leaders. Government officials told observers that membership in the Church of the Rock, an evangelical Christian church headed by the first lady, was required to be successful as a member of the government. In September the Catholic Bishops Conference released a letter denouncing intolerance and political violence ahead of presidential elections scheduled for May 2020, and priests read the statement aloud at Catholic services throughout the country, according to media.

Some Muslim leaders reported that public schools and those run by other religions sometimes excluded girls who opted to wear the hijab.

U.S. embassy representatives met with the Ministry of the Interior’s religious regulatory body, stressing U.S. support for religious freedom and discussing the group’s work to promote dialogue and tolerance within and among religious groups. The Ambassador, and later the Charge d’Affaires and other embassy representatives, encouraged societal leaders, including representatives of major faith groups, to support religious acceptance and promote interfaith discussion of the collaborative role religious groups could play in disseminating a message of peace and tolerance to the population.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12.2 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2008 national census (the most recent), 62 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 21.6 percent Protestant, 2.5 percent Muslim, and 2.3 percent Seventh-day Adventist. Another 6.1 percent have no religious affiliation, and 3.7 percent belong to indigenous religious groups. The Muslim population lives mainly in urban areas, and the head of the Islamic Community of Burundi estimates Muslims constitute 10-12 percent of the population. Most Muslims are Sunni. There are some Shia Muslims and a small Ismaili community. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox Christians, The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, Hindus, and Jains. A 2013 national survey found 557 religious groups in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes a secular state; prohibits religious discrimination; recognizes freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; and provides for equal protection under the law regardless of religion. These rights may be limited by law in the general interest or to protect the rights of others, and may not be abused to compromise national unity, independence, peace, democracy, or the secular nature of the state, or to violate the constitution. The constitution prohibits political parties from preaching religious violence, exclusion, or hate.

The government recognizes and registers religious groups through a 2014 law governing the organic framework of religious confessions, which states these organizations must register with the Ministry of the Interior. There is a 20,000 Burundian franc (\$11) fee for registration. Each religious group must provide the denomination or affiliation of the institution, a copy of its bylaws, the address of its headquarters in the country, an address abroad if the local institution is part of a larger group, and the names and addresses of the association's governing body and legal representative. Registration also entails identifying any property and bank accounts owned by the religious group. The ministry usually processes registration requests within two to four weeks. Leaders, administrators, or adherents of religious groups who continue to practice after their registration has been denied, or after a group has been dissolved or suspended, are subject to six months' to five years' imprisonment and a fine.

The law regulating religious groups also incorporates specific registration requirements. Any new, independent religious group based in the country must have a minimum of 300 members. Foreign-based religious groups seeking to establish a presence in the country must have 500 members. The law prohibits membership in more than one religious group at the same time.

The law on religious groups does not address tax exemptions or other benefits to religious groups; however, the financial law exempts tax for goods imported by religious groups that can demonstrate the importation of these goods is in the public interest.

Some religious schools have agreements with the government entitling them to tax exemptions when investing in infrastructure or purchasing school equipment and educational materials.

The official curriculum includes religion and morality classes for all primary and secondary schools. The program offers religious instruction in Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam, although all classes may not be available if the number of students interested is insufficient in a particular school. Students are free to choose from one of these three religion classes or attend morality classes instead.

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

Government Practices

In May police arrested 23 Church members, including Barishinga and elected administrators, and released them after more than a week of detention following appeals by the world Church headquarters to the government. Two members reported having been beaten during their detention. On July 27, police intervened to prevent violence when Ndikubwayo led a group attempting to enter a church in Buganda in the northwest of the country during services held by supporters of Barishinga. On October 2, in Ngozi in the north-central part of the country, police reportedly beat Barishinga supporters during a confrontation between followers of each of the disputed Church leaders, according to media.

In July the ECD released a statement that said the government improperly recognized only the part of the Church controlled by Ndikubawayo, that it had given him access to the Church's financial accounts after he had been dismissed by the ECD, and that large and unauthorized withdrawals had been made from those accounts followed by donations to government officials in the name of the Church. At year's end, the government continued to support Ndikubawayo's position as Church president.

President Pierre Nkurunziza routinely employed religious rhetoric in the context of political speeches and invoked divine guidance for political decisions. The government continued a campaign launched in 2017 promoting the “moralization of society,” which was criticized by several NGOs as a “religious crusade” targeting the churches and morals of the country. The president conducted events in provinces around the country attended by invited groups including government officials, ruling party members, religious leaders, and other local notables. During the events, which were not recorded or open to media and during which participants were not allowed to take notes, he gave lengthy addresses highlighting a mix of religious, historical, and cultural themes. The president also continued efforts begun in 2017 and connected rhetorically to the “moralization” campaign and invoking religious appeals, to require unmarried cohabitating couples to formalize their relationships as marriages.

President Nkurunziza and, according to press reports, most government ministers belonged to the Church of the Rock, an evangelical Christian church headed by First Lady Denise Nkurunziza. The Church designated Thursday as a weekly day of prayer

and fasting for members of the ruling political party in honor of the president. Government officials told observers that membership in the Church of the Rock was required to be successful as a member of the government.

In April the Ministry of the Interior announced that all churches built of nondurable materials had one month to comply with the law on building standards to continue operating; however, there were no reports that any churches were shut down.

In August National Assembly President Pascal Nyabenda warned the Catholic Church on Twitter not to meddle in politics in the approach to the 2020 elections and to avoid expressing political opinions, which he called destabilizing.

In September the Catholic Bishops Conference released a letter denouncing intolerance and political violence ahead of presidential elections scheduled for May 2020. When a copy of the letter was leaked prior to official release, the senior communication advisor to the president stated some bishops should be defrocked for “spreading hatred” before elections, and the secretary general of the ruling CNDD-FDD party accused the bishops of dividing the country. Priests read the statement aloud in churches on the following Sunday. Days later, the presidential spokesperson stated publicly that the “statement of Catholic bishops is a normal statement,” adding that “they have the right to express themselves as it is a sign of a strong democracy.”

In November government media reported that the interior minister recommended that churches not hold general assemblies until after the May 2020 presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections, reportedly to avoid leadership conflicts.

In April the government reduced from 11 to eight the membership of the Body for the Regulation and Conciliation of Religious Confessions. The government established this religious monitoring committee in 2018 to ensure religious groups complied with applicable laws and to mediate conflicts within and between groups. By year’s end, membership had dropped to seven; five from religious groups and two from the government. The religious group members included the grand mufti of the Muslim community and four Protestant leaders; the Catholic representative who resigned in 2018 was not replaced. The president of the regulatory body said the Catholic Church chose to remain independent and instead consulted with the government via a separate agreement. Religious leaders appointed by the government served as president and vice president of the body, and a government employee served as executive secretary. The body continued its efforts to promote dialogue among and within religious denominations during the year but was constrained by resource limitations, according to the body’s president.

The government continued to grant benefits, such as tax waivers, to religious groups for the acquisition of materials to manage development projects. According to the Burundi Revenue Authority, the government also granted tax waivers to religious denominations for the import of religious materials such as printed materials, wines for masses, and equipment to produce communion wafers.

On July 3, National Assembly President Pascal Nyabenda presented airline tickets and funding for a pilgrimage to Mecca to an 82-year-old Muslim who had expressed sadness at being unable to afford the pilgrimage during a 2017 ceremony welcoming returning pilgrims.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some Muslim leaders reported that public schools and those run by other religious denominations sometimes excluded girls who opted to wear the hijab.

Several religious leaders participated in a U.S.-Swiss sponsored conference among religious leaders of Great Lakes countries, which also included the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda, to explore ways that religious leaders could use their influence to prevent and mitigate conflict.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives met with the religious leaders who chaired the Body for the Regulation and Conciliation of Religious Confessions, stressing U.S. support for religious freedom and discussing the committee’s work to promote dialogue and tolerance within and among religious groups.

The Ambassador, and later the Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials, regularly met with religious leaders of various faiths to discuss how to improve religious freedom in the country. The embassy encouraged societal leaders, including political leaders and representatives of major faith groups, to support religious acceptance and promote interfaith discussion of the collaborative role religious groups could play in disseminating a message of peace and tolerance to the population.

Embassy officials continued to promote interfaith dialogue and support efforts by local civil society organizations to do the same. Senior embassy leadership participated in public events organized by Bujumbura’s Muslim community to foster productive engagement among members of the community and between the community and other religious denominations.

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