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2019 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 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 some of the 8,760 churches, mosques, and other places of worship that were closed in 2018 for violating health and safety standards and/or noise pollution ordinances to reopen after they made required infrastructure improvements. As of December 5, the government reported that 2,016 places of worship had been allowed to reopen.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported government-subsidized Roman Catholic schools required all students to attend Mass regardless of personal faith. Religious leaders reported 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 FBOs to identify ambiguities in the law and raised them with senior government officials. Embassy staff also urged the government to communicate clearly the reasons for closing a specific place of worship on health and safety grounds, make that information available to the public, and work with the affected FBO to identify required infrastructure improvements. The embassy hosted interfaith events, including an iftar, where religious freedom and tolerance were among the key messages. The Ambassador hosted an interfaith lunch for representatives of the Anglican Church, Lutheran Church, Muslim community, and evangelical Christian churches and emphasized the importance of interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12.5 million (midyear 2019). 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, 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 500,000 to 1,000,000 Rwandan francs (\$540 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 his/her deputy, their duties, full address, and criminal records; a document certifying the legal representative and his/her 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, are not required to reapply but must 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 the FBO’s application for legal status, the FBO 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.

By law, new public servants must take an oath of loyalty, which includes the phrase “so help me God.” Those who do not fulfill the requirement forfeit their position. The law does not make accommodations for those whose beliefs are not consistent with this requirement.

The law establishes fines of one to two million Rwandan francs (\$1,100 to \$2,200) 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 Rwandan francs (\$110 to \$220), 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 500,000 to 1,000,000 Rwandan francs (\$540 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 500,000 to 1,000,000 Rwandan francs (\$540 to \$1,100), and repeat offenders are subject to increased fines and up to one month’s imprisonment. By law, FBOs 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.

All 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, register, 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 (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 Rwandan francs (\$110).

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

Government Practices

During the year, some of the 8,760 places of worship across the country that the government had closed in 2018 because of what it deemed were violations of health and safety standards and/or noise pollution ordinances were allowed to reopen their physical premises after making the required infrastructure improvements, according to religious leaders. Many other facilities remained shuttered. As of December 5, the government reported that 2,016 places of worship had been allowed to reopen. Authorities again stated that the closures were necessary to protect the health of worshippers and stressed that while some places of worship had been closed, religious organizations had not been closed. In many cases, those congregations whose buildings remained closed opted to hold worship services in hotels, private residences, or buildings belonging to other congregations. Some of the affected groups reported that authorities clearly communicated the reasons for the closures and the steps needed to reopen. Others stated that authorities did not clearly explain which deficiencies needed to be remedied and that their places of worship remained closed as a result. These religious groups and other observers continued to express skepticism regarding the government's actual motivation for closing the places of worship.

Amazing Grace, a Christian radio station, remained closed throughout the year. The Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA) had revoked the station's broadcasting license in April 2018 because of complaints about a January 2018 broadcast of a sermon by local Pastor Nicolas Niyibikora in which he said women were "dangerous creatures of evil, going against God's plans." RURA had also ordered the station's owner to apologize for Niyibikora's remarks and pay a fine. In May a court rejected the station's owner's suit against RURA and the Rwanda Media Commission for violating his right to opinion and conscience, ruling the station should have complied with RURA's sanctions. On October 7, the station's owner, a U.S. citizen, was arrested and deported to the United States.

Authorities stated the owner was arrested because he attempted to hold a press conference on a public street without a permit. The director general of immigration and emigration told press the owner was deported as a prohibited immigrant because of his involvement in “activities that cause public disorder.”

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported in some cases they could negotiate alternatives to participating in compulsory community night patrols. Jehovah’s Witnesses explained that they considered these night patrols to be similar to military service, which their faith prohibits.

Jehovah’s Witnesses students were reportedly punished and dismissed from school for not attending religious services at school or not participating in military and patriotic activities at school. For example, 25 students were reportedly dismissed from school in January in Rutsiro District after they refused to sing the national anthem and participate in prayers. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported government-subsidized Catholic schools required all students to attend Mass regardless of their personal faith.

Government officials and religious leaders stated that unregistered religious groups received a significant degree of government scrutiny of their leadership, activities, and registration application until they obtained FBO registration under the law. Small religious congregations sometimes affiliated with larger registered organizations in order to operate.

Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to pursue judicial remedies for civil servants and teachers dismissed for refusing to swear an oath on the flag. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that authorities included the names of those dismissed over the issue of oath-taking on an online list of persons considered unsuitable for public service, making it difficult for these individuals to obtain employment in the private sector as well. Jehovah’s Witnesses leadership engaged with officials in the Office of the President to discuss the matter, but as of year’s end, the legal requirement that civil servants and teachers swear an oath on the flag remained in place.

Government officials and religious leaders stated that both Christian and Islamic places of worship were affected by noise ordinance restrictions and were required to limit the volume on their sound equipment. Some places of worship were also required to install soundproofing materials.

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. Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to reject this legal requirement on religious grounds but were not able to obtain a waiver. Jehovah’s Witnesses said the requirement made it difficult for them to marry legally because few officials were willing to perform the ceremony without the flag oath. For some Jehovah’s Witnesses, placing their hands on a Bible on top of the flag was an acceptable alternative.

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

On April 20, President Paul Kagame attended the launch of Hindu prayers called Ram Katha at the Kigali Convention Center.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders reported numerous religious groups and associations contributed to greater religious understanding and tolerance by participating in interfaith meetings 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. Activities included campaigns against child abuse, child labor, malnutrition, and drug abuse. In January the RRLF also signed a memorandum of understanding with the government in which it agreed to partner on programs to promote gender equity and fight gender-based violence.

In September the country's first synagogue opened in Kigali.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives engaged with government officials, including RGB staff responsible for FBO registration, to discuss the FBO law and its implementation. Embassy representatives consulted with FBOs to identify ambiguities in the law and raised them with senior government officials. Embassy representatives also urged the government to communicate clearly the reasons for closing a specific place of worship on health and safety grounds, make that information available to the public, and work with the affected religious group to develop a plan to address any shortcomings with respect to health and safety standards and noise pollution ordinances.

The embassy hosted interfaith discussions focused on religious diversity and included members of different religious groups in public outreach programs it conducted during the year. In September the Ambassador hosted an event for representatives of the Anglican Church, Lutheran Church, Muslim community, and evangelical Christian churches. The Ambassador emphasized the importance of interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. In June the Ambassador hosted an iftar attended by approximately 50 guests, including the Grand Mufti of Rwanda and representatives from the government, diplomatic corps, local universities, as well as members of the Muslim community. In his remarks, the Ambassador emphasized the U.S. commitment to promoting religious liberty, called for people of all religious groups to be allowed to practice their faith freely and without fear, and recognized the Muslim community for

providing strong support to the reconciliation process in the 25 years following the 1994 genocide. The Ambassador and embassy officials also engaged religious leaders through the Rwanda Religious Leaders Forum.

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