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2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Rwanda

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
July 30, 2012

[Covers calendar year from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011]

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. Government actions against Jehovah's Witnesses refusing to swear oaths on the national flag remained a problem.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy regularly engaged with government officials and religious leaders regarding religious freedom and tolerance, particularly with respect to reasonable accommodation of religious practices as they relate to the country's laws and social norms.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to a 2002 census, Roman Catholics constitute 57 percent of the population, Protestant denominations 26 percent, Seventh-day Adventists 11 percent, and Muslims 5

percent. Groups that constitute less than 1 percent of the population include practitioners of indigenous and traditional religions and Baha'is. There are growing numbers of Jehovah's Witnesses, evangelical Protestants, and smaller Christian religious groups, each of which constitutes less than 1 percent of the population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The constitution protects the rights of individuals to choose or change their religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion, which by law is punishable by one month to one year in prison and fines up to 5,000 Rwandan francs (\$8.30). The government does not permit individuals to express their religious identity through headdress in official photos for passports, driver's licenses, or other official documents.

Government officials presiding over wedding ceremonies generally require couples to take an oath while touching the national flag, a customary practice stated in government instructions but not in the law. Jehovah's Witnesses often object to this practice on religious grounds.

The penal code establishes fines of 100 to 10,000 Rwandan francs (\$0.15 to \$16.65) and imprisonment of eight days to five years for anyone who interferes with a religious ceremony or with a religious minister in the exercise of professional duties.

All nonprofit organizations, including churches and religious organizations, must register with the Ministry of Local Government and the Ministry of Justice to acquire legal status. The government generally imposes difficult and burdensome registration and renewal requirements for organizations, including religious organizations, as well as time-consuming requirements to submit annual financial and activity reports. Although authorities have not granted official legal status to any religious groups pending passage of a religious communities law, under consideration in parliament since 2008, religious organizations may receive "provisional authorization" by presenting their objectives and plans of action to local and district authorities. Therefore, some religious organizations operate as nongovernmental organizations or as provisional local churches without full legal protection. As a result, some religious organizations are not authorized to proselytize, are subject to different visa requirements, and are subject to a significant degree of government scrutiny of their activities.

The law regulates public meetings and establishes fines of up to one million Rwandan francs (\$1,665) and imprisonment of up to two months for unauthorized public meetings, including assemblies for religious reasons. If a group is registered, no prior authorization for its meetings is required, although authorities legally may require advance notice for outdoor rallies, demonstrations, and meetings.

For night meetings, including religious meetings, local authorities often require advance notification, particularly for ceremonies involving amplified music and boisterous celebrations.

Every foreign missionary must have a Class I Approved Religious Activities 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 residence, an authorization letter from the parent organization, and a fee of 100,000 Rwandan francs (\$165).

The government requires all students in primary school and the first three years of secondary education in public schools to take a religion class, which covers various religions. The law neither includes opt-out provisions nor penalties for not taking part in the class. The law allows parents to enroll their children in private religious schools.

The constitution prohibits the formation of political organizations based on religion or other identifying factors that could give rise to discrimination.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter, Assumption, Eid al-Fitr, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. However, there continued to be concerns regarding the treatment of some minority religious groups, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses.

Following the July 29 conviction of Catholic priest Emile Nsengiyumva for threatening state security after he gave a sermon criticizing government family planning and housing programs, several pastors of different denominations began to report monitoring by government agents attending religious services. Some pastors privately expressed fear of potential consequences for contradicting government policies.

The number of Jehovah's Witnesses expelled from schools or detained for offenses related to their beliefs decreased compared to prior years. However, in the first half of

the year, 21 Jehovah's Witnesses working in six different government agencies were fired for refusing to touch the national flag while taking a new public servant's oath. Two of the employees were teachers. The Minister of Public Service and Labor confirmed that individuals who did not comply with the new requirement to cite an oath of loyalty while touching the flag were subject to dismissal under an August 2010 cabinet directive based on Law Number 22/2002 on General Statutes for Rwanda's Public Service. All of the dismissed public servants sued their former employers. The Karongi District Intermediate Court dismissed two cases, but the complainants appealed. At year's end the appeals were tentatively scheduled for April 2012, and the remaining 19 cases were awaiting trial. None of the 21 employees fired regained their positions during the year.

In contrast to prior years, the government generally respected the right of Jehovah's Witnesses to abstain from singing the national anthem in school and from participating in armed night patrols and government-sponsored "solidarity" civil and military training (Itorero and Ingando). Local authorities detained two Jehovah's Witnesses from Gicumbi and Kayonza Districts in March and April for refusing, based on religious beliefs, to participate in armed night patrols. Police held the detainees for three days. There was a report of one Jehovah's Witness being expelled from school in Gakenke District for refusing to sing the national anthem on February 14. The student was not readmitted.

The government's requirement that couples take an oath while touching the national flag has made it difficult for Jehovah's Witnesses to marry legally, since few officials are willing to perform the ceremony without the flag requirement. For some Jehovah's Witnesses, placing their hands on a Bible on top of the flag has been an acceptable alternative.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were a few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

On October 28, the Catholic-affiliated Musanze School of Science suspended 35 Seventh-day Adventist students for missing an exam scheduled on their Sabbath. The school reinstated 23 of the students after they pledged to respect school rules and regulations. Six of the students pleaded their case before the Ministry of Education without resolution and subsequently transferred to an Adventist institution.

Numerous associations and interfaith groups, such as the Ecumenical Council of Churches and the Protestant Council of Rwanda, contributed to greater understanding and

tolerance among various religious groups. The Interfaith Commission for Rwanda supported programs aimed at reconciling genocide survivors, released genocide prisoners, and genocide detainees' families.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy regularly engaged with government officials and religious leaders regarding religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy officials raised the issue of reasonable accommodation of religious practices with the government and also met with leaders of religious communities on a wide variety of subjects, following up specifically with regard to each problem reported. The embassy conducted public outreach on religious issues with various religious communities, addressing religious tolerance and diversity as well as the role of religion in the United States.
