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July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Rwanda

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
September 13, 2011

[Covers six-month period from 1 July 2010 to 31 December 2010 (USDOS is shifting to a calendar year reporting period)]

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice; however, there continued to be concerns regarding the treatment of some minority religious groups. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

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. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 10,169 square miles and a population of 11 million.

According to a 2002 census, Roman Catholics constitute 57 percent of the population, main-line denomination Protestants, 26 percent; Seventh-day Adventists, 11 percent; and Muslims, 5 percent. Groups that constitute less than 1 percent of the population include indigenous religious practitioners and Bahais. There are growing numbers of Jehovah's Witnesses (approximately 18,000), evangelical Protestants, and Christian-linked schismatic religious groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The constitution protects the rights of individuals to choose or change their religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion or faith, which is punishable by law.

The government does not designate religion on passports or national identity cards, nor does the government permit individuals to reflect 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 practice to which Jehovah's Witnesses objected on religious grounds. This practice made it difficult for members to marry legally, since few officials were 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 was an acceptable alternative.

The penal code provides for small fines and/or imprisonment of up to six months for anyone who interferes with a religious ceremony or with a religious minister in the exercise of professional duties.

The law regulates public meetings and establishes fines or imprisonment 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.

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 without full legal protection.

Every foreign missionary in the country must have a religious/missionary visa and a foreign identity card. Specific requirements to obtain this type of visa include a completed application, a visa application letter signed by the legal representative, a signed curriculum vitae, an authorization letter from their parent organization, and a fee of 51,288 Rwandan francs (\$87). The renewable, multiple-entry religious/missionary visa is valid for one year.

The government required 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, as a required extracurricular subject. The law allows parents, for religious reasons, to enroll their children in private religious schools.

The constitution prohibits the formation of political organizations based on race, ethnic group, tribe, clan, region, sex, religion, or any other division that may give rise to discrimination.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice; however, there continued to be concerns regarding the treatment of some minority religious groups.

There continued to be tensions between the government and the Catholic Church regarding the role of current and former church officials during the 1994 genocide.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country including religious detainees.

According to media reports, authorities briefly detained at least 14 members of a break-away, unregistered faction of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in June and 20 members of another break-away, unregistered faction of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 2010 for boycotting national identification card registration for religious reasons. Most members subsequently agreed to register.

A total of 118 Jehovah's Witnesses students have been expelled from school since 2008 for refusing to sing the national anthem. Between April 2009 and June 2010, school officials readmitted 102 of the 118 expelled students; however, as of the end of the reporting period school officials had not readmitted any of the remaining 16 students. During the reporting period, school officials did not expel any Jehovah's Witnesses students for refusing to sing the national anthem.

In 2008 school officials in certain districts fired 215 Jehovah's Witnesses teachers for not participating in government sponsored "solidarity training" (Itorero). As of the end of the reporting period, 119 remained unemployed, 48 had gone to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 47 found alternative employment, and one had returned to teaching.

In 2005 the minister of local government issued a decree stating that Jehovah's Witnesses were not required to participate in night patrols. However, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses' Office of General Counsel, local authorities detained Jehovah's Witnesses for a period of seven to nine nights for refusing to participate, due to religious beliefs, in armed night patrols throughout the reporting period. Additionally, police arrested two Jehovah's Witnesses in June and released them 30 days later. No new laws requiring participation by Jehovah's Witnesses in night patrols have been passed since the 2005 decree.

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Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

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.

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. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

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