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2022 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. The law requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Interior (MOI) before operating.

In order to register with the MOI, groups must meet certain standards, including a minimum number of adherents. In September, the government passed a law amending the 2014 law regulating religious groups, which included expanding government oversight over the registration, operation, and management of religious groups. While some religious groups voiced concerns regarding some of the contents of the new law, other groups expressed support. As of year's end, however, the law had not been enforced or used as a basis for government action. Police did not enforce bans on nonaccredited religions. In July, police arrested and imprisoned approximately 26 followers of Eusebie Ngendakumana, considered a Catholic prophet by her followers, for holding a prayer session considered illegal by local authorities in Kirundo province. Two pastors from the Unity in the Holy Spirit Church (EUSEBU), a denomination with Pentecostal roots and a countrywide presence, were killed in Bujumbura's Muha Commune on April 2, reportedly due to a struggle for control of the church, with police arresting 11 other EUSEBU pastors in connection with the killings.

In January, the National Conference of Churches of Burundi (CNEB) organized a two-day workshop for representatives of different religious groups on the role of religious leaders in the development of the country. A Muslim nongovernmental organization (NGO) reported that young Muslim women were at higher risk of becoming victims of human trafficking.

During meetings with government officials, the U.S. Ambassador discussed U.S. government engagement with religious leaders and other religion-related topics, including noting the strong leadership of local religious representatives in strengthening social cohesion and promoting peace. The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials met with key religious leaders, including from the Anglican and Catholic Churches and Muslim communities, to discuss ways to improve religious freedom in the country and confront challenges.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12.7 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2008 national census (the most recent), 62 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 21.6 percent Protestant, and 2.3 percent Seventh-day Adventist. Another 6.1 percent have no religious affiliation, 3.7 percent belong to indigenous religious groups, and 2.5 percent identify as Muslim. The Muslim population lives mainly in urban areas; most are Sunni, although there are some Shia communities, as well as a small number of Ismaili Muslims in Bujumbura. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include the Church of the Rock, Free Methodists, members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox Christians, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Eglise Vivante, Eglise du Bon Berger, Hindus, and Jains. According to 2022 Ministry of Interior statistics, there are approximately 16,000 registered 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. By law, all religious celebrations and prayer sessions must not cause harm to the natural environment and must respect public order.

In September, the government passed a new law that superseded the 2014 law regulating religious groups. Key provisions of the 2014 law remain in effect, including requirements that religious organizations must register with the MOI and that each religious group applying for registration must provide the denomination or affiliation of the institution, a copy of its bylaws, the address of its headquarters in the country, a foreign address if the group is headquartered overseas, and the names and addresses of the association's governing body and legal representative.

The new law further requires that religious group facilities meet construction and sanitation requirements and prohibits activities during working hours without the Ministry of Interior's authorization. Additionally, all religious groups must undertake an economic or social initiative such as establishing a school, health center, or another social or economic project. The law prohibits individuals on their own or within a religious denomination from professing themselves to be God and also prohibits the promotion of atheism.

The new law additionally requires legal representatives of religious groups to be Burundian citizens, no less than 30 years old, and hold at least a bachelor's degree. The law mandates that members of religious groups' governing bodies be limited to a five-year term, renewable through democratic elections. The law gives the MOI the right to organize elections if religious leaders fail to do so at the end of their term. The law also includes a requirement that any religious group headquartered outside of the country conclude a framework agreement with the government and ensure traceability of all foreign funding.

The law regulating religious groups provides additional registration requirements, including respect for environmental conditions, hygiene, public order, distancing, and noise pollution. According to the law, any independent religious group based in the country filing a registration application must have a minimum of 300 members to qualify. Foreign-based religious groups seeking to establish a presence

in the country must have at least 500 members in-country to qualify. The law prohibits foreigners from being part of executive and decision-making committees of religious groups at the national level. The MOI provisionally grants legal status for up to two years while registration approval is pending, in order to ensure all requirements are met.

The law on religious groups does not provide broad tax exemptions or other benefits; however, the financial laws exempt from tax those goods imported by religious groups if the groups can demonstrate importation of the 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 MOI usually processes registration requests within two to four weeks. Leaders, administrators, or adherents of religious groups who continue to practice after registration is denied, or after the dissolution or suspension of a previously approved registration, are subject to six months to five years of imprisonment, a fine, or both.

The official school 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 classes or attend morality classes instead.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

In a June presentation on the general situation regarding religious groups and non-profit organizations, the MOI noted that the number of religious groups in the country was rapidly increasing and stated that many are flouting the law while not contributing to the development of the country. The MOI's permanent secretary therefore requested governors shut down churches that do not follow regulations. There were, however, no reports of governors taking such action during the year.

Civil society and religious leaders contended the September amendments to the law on religions will result in fewer religious groups being accredited and many others having their accreditation revoked. The new law has elicited criticism, as well as support, from across the religious sphere. A leader of a protestant church and member of the Network of Christian Churches for Peace and Reconciliation in Burundi expressed regret that the government did not request input from religious leaders to make the new law as suitable as possible. He further stated he believes the newly enacted provision allowing the ministry to organize elections of religious leaders is an attempt to interfere in religious groups' operations. A representative of CNEB echoed that sentiment and added that provisions like the traceability of funds from foreign countries for the financing of religious denominations are likely linked to overarching foreign currency controls and other broad economic issues, rather than a specific regulation targeting religion.

Media outlets reported that on July 30, police arrested approximately 25 followers of Eusebie Ngendakumana, also known as Zebiya, and detained them in a Kirundo prison on charges of holding a prayer session deemed illegal because the group is not accredited. Authorities released them after 10 days upon payment of 100,000 Burundian francs (\$49) each. Ngendakumana, whom her followers described as a Catholic prophet, had a shrine at her home in Businde, in Kayanza Province, stating that she had regular visions of the Virgin Mary on the 12th of each month. Her followers, who had

been deported from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to Burundi in 2020 after five years spent in the DRC's South Kivu and North Kivu Provinces, said that the shrine is a holy pilgrimage site, but that they feared for their safety in Burundi. Community residents complained of noise levels and property damage caused by Ngendakumana's followers, which led to physical altercations, resulting in police intervening and prohibiting followers from accessing the shrine. For six years, police have sought to locate and arrest Ngendakumana on charges of "inciting civil disobedience." The group had not sought accreditation as a religious denomination because members stated they considered themselves members of the Catholic Church. Catholic leadership in country has stated publicly that Ngendakumana is not affiliated with the church.

On April 2, two pastors from EUSEBU were shot in southern Bujumbura's Muha Commune. Jean Gordien Niyungeko, EUSEBU's legal representative in the country, died soon after being shot, and the head of EUSEBU's branch in the United States, who was visiting Niyungeko, was taken to hospital but died the following day. Addressing the shooting, a police spokesperson announced that an unidentified criminal wearing military attire and carrying an AK-47 shot Niyungeko at point blank range outside the front gate of Niyungeko's house. After preliminary investigations, police arrested 11 EUSEBU pastors, eight from Makamba Province and three from Bujumbura, but did not provide further details. Media sources unanimously pointed to a struggle for control of the church as the motive for the killings.

Media reports indicated tensions within EUSEBU have been growing since November 2021, when two of EUSEBU's founders, Joel Gahimbare and Laban Barankunda, fought over leadership of the church. The church's council of pastors subsequently suspended both Gahimbare and Barankunda for three months. Barankunda, who was supported by the country's ruling political party, protested the decision and reportedly asked the local administrator and party representative to harass and intimidate the members of the council who voted for his suspension. The council of pastors nevertheless voted to expel Barankunda from the church on March 5. Ignoring his expulsion, Barankunda ordained new pastors to replace those who voted to expel him and attempted to assume management of EUSEBU by force. Church members responded by organizing protests and physically blocking Barankunda and his newly appointed pastors from accessing the church, leading police and the National Intelligence Service to intervene in several clashes between the groups. Police arrested at least 10 pastors after the clashes, including four who were convicted for "undermining the internal security of the state." The whereabouts and status of the cases of the other pastors remained unknown at year's end.

The country's ruling political party organized monthly "thanksgiving crusades" on the last Thursday of each month in all provinces around the country and invited government officials, party members, religious leaders, and other notable local figures to attend. During the events, clergy from various churches gave prayers of thanks for the blessings the party and its members had received. Government officials delivered speeches that included references to scriptures and their applicability to events in the country, and recommended ways party members should improve their moral behavior on a personal level and as members of the party.

Media outlets highlighted weekly visits by government officials to various churches throughout the year, including by President Évariste Ndayishimiye, Vice President Prosper Bazombanza, Speaker of the National Assembly Gelais-Daniel Ndabirabe, and President of the Senate Emmanuel Sinzohagera. In some instances, church leaders gave officials opportunities to preach about scriptures and moral issues. Senate President Sinzohagera also served as the legal representative of the Free Methodist Church.

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 for imported items such as printed religious materials, wine for masses or other religious services, and equipment to produce communion wafers. The revenue agency organized a meeting with religious leaders to explain the obligation to pay tax on commercial activities for their groups.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In January, CNEB organized a two-day workshop for representatives of various religious groups on the role of religious leaders in the development of the country. During the workshop, religious leaders discussed how to engage their followers, especially among youth, to find creative ways to contribute to the country's development.

International and local organizations reported that young Muslim women were particularly at risk of forced labor and sex trafficking. According to the representative of a local Muslim NGO, while many of the country's victims of trafficking in persons come from Muslim communities, non-Muslims seeking employment abroad are also often forced to convert to Islam before being accepted to work in Gulf countries, the destinations for many of the country's trafficking victims.

On April 5, national police arrested pastors Audace Ndikumana and Vital Mpebera on charges of defrauding their followers. Ndikumana and Mpebera, who lead the Faith Miracles Church and Good News Mission Church, respectively, promised their followers extremely high rates of return on funds deposited into an account managed by the two pastors. Police apprehended the pastors as they were planning to flee after reportedly collecting almost one billion Burundian francs (\$489,000) from their followers.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials engaged in discussions with a number of locally based religious representatives. The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly met with key religious leaders, including from the Anglican and Catholic Churches and Muslim communities, to discuss ways to improve religious freedom in the country. The embassy encouraged community leaders, including political leaders and representatives of major faith-based groups, to support the acceptance of all religious groups as well as to promote interfaith discussion regarding the collaborative role that religious groups could play in disseminating a message of peace and religious tolerance to the wider population. During meetings with government officials, the Ambassador discussed U.S. government engagement with religious leaders, explained the embassy's project with the Inter Religious Council of Burundi, and noted the strong leadership of local religious representatives in strengthening social cohesion and promoting peace.

During an August meeting with leaders of the Inter Religious Council of Burundi, composed of representatives from the country's major faiths, the Ambassador and the religious leaders discussed the country's top challenges and how religious groups could help address them. The Ambassador also met with the secretary general of CNEB as part of the continued U.S commitment to encourage reconciliation between different faith groups.

The embassy amplified its engagements on religious freedom and with religious groups through social media campaigns, such as in the following tweet: "Religious leaders play key roles in strengthening social cohesion, fostering peace & laying the foundation for economic prosperity. Proud to discuss these topics and U.S engagement to promote reconciliation within Burundi, with leaders from Burundi's Interreligious Council."

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