

2023 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 religious groups and faith-based organizations (FBOs) to obtain legal status before beginning operations. It requires new organizations to secure land and facilities adequate for their activities before obtaining legal status. It also calls for legal representatives of FBOs and preachers with supervisory responsibilities in those organizations to hold academic degrees. The government requires churches, mosques, and other places of worship to meet certain health and safety standards and abide by noise pollution ordinances. The law imposes fines and imprisonment as punishments for obstruction or public defamation of religious rituals.

Together, health, safety, and noise requirements made it more difficult for smaller, less resourced, independent groups to operate. Groups that had closed because they could not meet these requirements often consolidated with other groups so they could have sufficient resources to meet in facilities compliant with the requirements. Religious leaders said they recognized the value in basic infrastructure standards for places of worship but that greater flexibility in applying those standards was merited in different urban and rural contexts. Authorities cited noise pollution ordinances to prohibit several mosques from broadcasting the call to prayer via loudspeakers at the usual volume. In response to complaints that Jehovah's Witnesses were being forced to participate in religious ceremonies that violated their beliefs at government-funded religious schools, the Minister of Education clarified that according to the law, no student should be dismissed for their "thought, conscience, religion, or worship." Although he also ordered schools to readmit students who had been wrongfully dismissed, the Jehovah's Witnesses community continued to allege discriminatory treatment.

Religious leaders participated in interfaith meetings, religious umbrella organizations, and interfaith groups, collaborating on public service and awareness campaigns and community development projects.

U.S. embassy representatives engaged with the government, including the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB), the public regulator of the civil society sector, and foreign affairs and law enforcement officials, on the importance of maintaining a collaborative and respectful relationship with civil society and religious organizations, guaranteeing their rights as the government formulated and enforced regulations that applied to those organizations. Embassy representatives consulted with religious groups and FBOs on the well-being of their communities. Embassy representatives also met with Catholic organizations focused on social cohesion and reconciliation processes, and with Rwanda Muslim Community (RMC) leadership on the Muslim community's relations with the government.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 13.4 million (midyear 2023). According to the country's Fifth Population and Housing Census, conducted in August 2022, the population is 40 percent Roman Catholic; 21 percent Pentecostal; 15 percent Protestant, including Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, and evangelical Christian churches; 12 percent Seventh-day Adventist; 4

percent other Christian; 2 percent Muslim; and 0.7 percent Jehovah's Witnesses. Several other small religious groups, together constituting less than 3 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 3 percent of the population holds no religious beliefs. The majority of Muslims are Sunni, with a small number (200 to 300) of Shia, according to the RMC. While there are generally no concentrations of religious groups in specific 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 for 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 100,000 to one million Rwandan francs (\$80 to \$800).

Under the law determining the organization and functioning of FBOs, which include religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) associated with religious groups, any organization, umbrella organization, or ministry that intends to begin operations must obtain legal status from the RGB.

The law provides that a religious group or NGO 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 deputy, their duties, full address, and criminal records; a document certifying the legal representative and deputy were appointed in accordance with its statutes; a brief notarized statement explaining its doctrine; a notarized declaration of the organization's legal representatives 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 organization's building or meeting space 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 held legal personality as of September 10, 2018, when the law was passed, are not required to reapply but have to harmonize their functioning and statutes with the revised law and submit the revised statutes to the RGB within 12 months of the law's enactment.

Under the law, if the RGB denies a group's application for legal status, the group may reapply when the reason for denial no longer exists.

The law stipulates 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 legal representatives of religious groups or NGOs to hold a degree from an institution of higher learning. The law states persons

required to hold an academic degree shall have five years from the date of the law's enactment to comply with the requirement.

The law establishes fines of one million to two million Rwandan francs (\$800 to \$1,600) 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, a fine of 100,000 to 200,000 Rwandan francs (\$80 to \$160), or both.

The law regulates public meetings and states 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 100,000 to one million Rwandan francs (\$80 to \$800), or both. Penalties increase if the illegal meeting or demonstration is found to have threatened security, public order, or health. The law states religious sermons must be delivered in designated facilities that meet the requirements of the law, and an FBO intending to organize a special public gathering must seek authorization from the competent authority.

Under the law, FBOs are prohibited from causing noise pollution. Offenders are subject to a fine of 100,000 to one million Rwandan francs (\$80 to \$800), and repeat offenders are subject to increased fines and up to one month's imprisonment. By law, groups may not use their faith, religious practices, or preaching to jeopardize national unity, peace and security, public order and health, good morals, good conduct, freedom, or the fundamental rights of others.

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 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 provides 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, or use any other means to support candidates for public office.

Every foreign missionary must have a temporary resident permit and a foreign identity card. Specific requirements to obtain the permit (which is 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 (\$80).

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

At a youth event on August 23, the President criticized Christians making pilgrimages to Marian apparition sites, asserting the pilgrims were "worshipping poverty" and threatening to imprison them if the pilgrimages occurred again. Every year more than 20,000 Catholics from around the world make pilgrimages to the town of Kebeho, known for several apparitions of the Virgin Mary to three young girls in the early 1980s. Other, smaller sites known for Marian apparitions also receive pilgrimages. A government spokeswoman later clarified that the President was referring only to pilgrimages in Rutsiro where there have been allegations of poor conditions and mistreatment of the mostly young pilgrims. The spokeswoman said the President's message was intended to encourage youth "to be ambitious and work hard, instead of being influenced by cult-like rituals."

During the year the government continued to enforce requirements, imposed since 2018 related to basic infrastructure, health, safety, and noise pollution standards for houses of worship. During the initial enforcement of these requirements in 2018, authorities closed almost 9,000 places of worship, and more than 6,000 remained closed at year's end. Some groups that closed because they could not meet the infrastructure requirements consolidated to become larger and better resourced organizations that were better able to meet the standards. Some pastors lamented it was more difficult to maintain community cohesiveness with such expanded membership. Religious leaders said they acknowledged the importance of basic infrastructure (toilets, for example) for houses of worship, but that it was not appropriate for certain very specific requirements such as mandatory numbers of parking spaces or minimum sizes for plots of land to be applied in the same way in urban and rural contexts.

The government continued to enforce a policy first announced in 2022 prohibiting mosques from announcing calls to prayer via loudspeaker in the morning on the grounds the loudspeakers contravened public noise ordinances. Government officials suggested the call to prayer could be delivered at a lower volume, consistent with ordinances, or via radio or other technological tools, reiterating noise ordinances equally applied to all activities, to include concerts, parties, and other social events, whether of a religious or nonreligious nature.

Jehovah's Witnesses said they did not encounter significant problems obtaining government employment owing to their religious beliefs, particularly those related to swearing oaths, and said the government generally provided reasonable accommodations to individuals holding these beliefs. They continued, however, to state that certain government-funded religious schools sought to force Jehovah's Witnesses' families to participate in religious ceremonies contrary to their beliefs and laws guaranteeing freedom of worship. This in some cases resulted in conflict and the expulsion or voluntary departure of students from school. The government took steps to address the problem. In March, the Minister of Education wrote to all local officials and relevant cabinet members directly responding to the concerns of Jehovah's Witnesses and clarifying that under the law, no student should be dismissed from school "due to his or her thought, conscience, religion or worship" and instructing schools to readmit any wrongfully dismissed students. Jehovah's Witnesses reported, however, that 11 students had been dismissed or voluntarily left school based on religious belief during the year.

Muslim community leaders stated they maintained a collaborative relationship with the Rwanda National Police to counter violent extremism related to religion. These efforts included youth and community outreach, cautioning community members about extremist recruitment efforts, countering violent extremism with messages of peace and inclusion, and urging cooperation with law enforcement. RMC and Rwanda National Police worked with youth volunteers under the auspices of the Ministry of Local Government. For example, youth volunteers organized training sessions with young Muslims in July. RMC stated there was ongoing communication between Muslim leaders and the Rwanda National Police antiterrorism units.

There were reports the government consistently monitored the internal leadership affairs of religious organizations so it could intervene in their processes if they were poised to take any actions the government viewed as contrary to the country's laws, policies, or interests. Some religious leaders and members of religious communities, as well as many members of the public, said the government needed to prevent the formation of, or intervene in, organizations that were religious in name only, functioning as de facto schemes for charismatic, individual leaders to extract financial support from poor and sometimes less educated citizens, while providing no substantial social support or faith community. Independent religious groups continued to face difficulties establishing themselves because many requirements for obtaining official registration – for example, purchasing or renting property – were difficult to fulfill for groups that did not already have legal status or significant financial means.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders said numerous religious groups and associations contributed to greater religious understanding and tolerance by participating in interfaith activities and collaborating on public awareness campaigns and community development projects. During the year, the Rwanda Interfaith Council on Health, an organization comprising umbrella organizations representing all major faith communities, including Catholics, Muslims, and Protestants, convened interfaith communities and coordinated their cooperation with one another and with the government on topics such as compliance with various health, safety, and infrastructure requirements. They also jointly carried out campaigns to prevent sexual and gender-based violence and support early childhood development in their communities.

Observers said religious organizations continued to play a crucial role in meeting the humanitarian needs of poor and vulnerable citizens. For example, during the year, some religious organizations, including Muslims, Catholics and Protestants paid fees for health insurance for vulnerable populations.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy representatives continued to engage with the government, including the RGB and foreign affairs and law enforcement officials, on the importance of maintaining a collaborative and respectful relationship with civil society and religious organizations, guaranteeing their rights as the government formulated and enforced regulations that applied to those organizations. Embassy representatives emphasized the positive contributions these groups provided and the importance of allowing them to freely organize themselves, exercise religious freedom, and participate in community activities, both as a matter of principle and in view of their important role advocating honest, effective governance. Embassy representatives urged government officials to ensure regulations relevant to religious organizations were applied in a transparent, fair manner and always in consultation with those organizations themselves.

Embassy representatives consulted with religious groups and FBOs (including Jehovah's Witnesses and other Christians and Muslims) on the well-being of their communities and how they were managing to meet government requirements for their operations. In addition, Embassy representatives met with Catholic organizations focused on social cohesion and reconciliation processes, and with RMC leadership on the Muslim community's relations with the government.

The embassy included religious community leaders in representational events throughout the year, emphasizing the importance of their voices in civil discourse.