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USDOS – US Department of State

2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Zimbabwe

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom to practice, propagate, and give expression to one’s religion, in public or in private and alone or with others. Religious and civil society groups reported the government continued to target public events and prayer rallies, and monitored or harassed church congregations and religiously affiliated nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) perceived to be critical of the government. In June politically active Pastor Evan Mawarire of His Generation Church was arrested while participating in a prayer meeting with University of Zimbabwe (UZ) students. In September he was acquitted on charges of intending to promote public violence and disorderly conduct. Religious leaders continued to criticize the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education for failing to consult with them on the language contained in the national pledge the ministry instituted in public schools in 2016. Some Christian leaders and parents of students reportedly criticized the ministry for formally including the study of Islam in the country’s new educational curriculum that was introduced in January.

As in previous years, some Christian groups continued to blame other Christian groups with indigenous beliefs, particularly the Apostolic community, for increasing HIV/AIDS rates by discouraging condom use and preventing HIV/AIDS education, as well as encouraging marriage with girls as young as 14. In August religious and civil society groups organized and hosted a 10-day Interfaith Dialogue Forum in Harare to promote religious tolerance.

The embassy met with religious leaders and faith-based organizations to discuss the role of faith communities in mitigating violence in advance of the 2018 election.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 13.8 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2015 nationwide Demographic and Health Survey conducted by the government statistics agency, 86 percent of the population is Christian, 11 percent reports no religious affiliation, less than 2 percent adheres uniquely to traditional beliefs, and less than 1 percent is Muslim. According to the survey, of the total population, 37 percent is Apostolic, 21 percent Pentecostal, 16 percent other Protestant, 7 percent Roman Catholic, and 5 percent other Christian.

While there are no reliable statistics regarding the percentage of the Christian population that is syncretic, many Christians also associate themselves with traditional practices, and religious leaders reported a continued increase in syncretism.

The Muslim population is concentrated in rural areas and some high-density suburbs, with smaller numbers living in other suburban neighborhoods. There are also small numbers of Greek Orthodox, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Bahais.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious belief and provides for freedom of religion and the freedom to practice, propagate, and give expression to one's religion, in public or in private and alone or with others. It recognizes the right of prisoners to communicate with and receive visits by their chosen religious counselor. It stipulates these rights may be limited by a law during a state of emergency or by a law taking into account, among other things, the interests of defense; public safety, order, morality, or health; regional or town planning; or the general public interest. Any such law must not impose greater restrictions on these rights than is necessary to achieve the purpose of the law. Although the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) restricts freedom of assembly, expression, and association in many cases, the act itself specifies that POSA is not meant to apply to public gatherings “held exclusively for *bona fide* religious...purposes.”

The government does not require religious groups to register; however, religious groups operating schools or medical facilities must register those institutions with the appropriate ministry. Religious groups as well as schools and medical facilities run by religious groups may receive tax-exempt status. Religious groups may apply for tax-exempt status and duty-free privileges with the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA), which generally grants these requests. To obtain tax-exempt status, a group is required to bring a letter of approval from a church umbrella organization confirming the group's status as a religious group. Examples of approval letter-granting organizations include the Catholic Bishops' Conference, Zimbabwe Council of Churches, and Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe. ZIMRA generally grants a certificate of tax-exempt status within two to three days.

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MPSE) sets curricula for public primary and secondary schools. Many public primary schools require a religious education course focusing on Christianity but covering other religious groups, emphasizing religious tolerance. There is no provision for opting out of religious instruction courses at the primary level. Students are able to opt out at the secondary level beginning at age 14, when they begin to choose their courses. The government does not regulate religious education in private schools but must approve employment of headmasters and teachers at those schools.

The law requires all international NGOs, including religiously affiliated NGOs, to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the government defining the NGO's activities and zones of geographic activity. The law stipulates international NGOs “shall not digress into programs that are not specified in the MOU as agreed upon by line ministries and registered by the Registrar.” Local NGOs, including religious NGOs, are not required by law to sign an MOU with the government but “shall, prior to their registration, notify the local authorities of their intended operations.” The law gives the government the right to “deregister any private voluntary organization that fails to comply with its conditions of registration.”

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

Government Practices

There were reports the government used security laws to target public events and prayer rallies of religious groups, particularly those events and rallies that the government reportedly perceived as politically motivated. According to human rights groups and media reports, Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) arrested Evan Mawarire, pastor of His Generation Church, on June 26 while he participated in a prayer meeting with UZ students. According to religious leaders, UZ students invited Mawarire to participate in the prayer meeting after they conducted a protest against an increase in student fees. Police charged Mawarire with participating in a gathering with intent to promote public violence and disorderly conduct as defined in the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act. On September 29, a magistrate acquitted Mawarire on all charges. In a separate case against Mawarire for subversion, a court found him not guilty on November 29. Presiding high court judge Priscilla Chigumba said, “He urged passive resistance, he urged prayers for peace. How can prayers for peace be considered an unconstitutional means of removing a constitutional government?”

In January local media reported that police arrested Pastor Patrick Mugadza, leader of the Remnant Pentecostal Church, for insulting persons of a certain race or religion after prophesizing that then-President Mugabe would die in October. The arrest came while Mugadza was making a court appearance in connection with a November 2016 charge of unlawfully and intentionally wearing or displaying the national flag over his shoulders without seeking permission from authorities. In October the Constitutional Court dismissed an application filed by Mugadza to stop his prosecution for making the prophecy, stating Mugadza insulted the Christian religion. There was no further action on the case by year's end.

On October 21, the ZRP blocked a planned event organized by NGO Ibhetshu LikaZulu, an advocacy and protection group, in Matabeleland South. Police barricaded the road to a memorial service that included prayers to commemorate the victims of the 1980s Gukurahundi mass killings of mainly Ndebele civilians by government forces, which stopped civil society and opposition political leaders from attending.

There were reports from religious and civil society groups of government monitoring or harassment of church congregations and religiously affiliated NGOs and their members perceived to be critical of the government. Instances included surveillance by security officials and denial of police permission to hold public events. Christian aid organizations and local NGOs focused on memorializing victims of the 1980s Gukurahundi mass killings said security officials also monitored their activities with increased frequency, particularly in areas considered strongholds of the political opposition.

While religious activities and events continued to be exempt from POSA regulations, the government continued to categorize as political any public gathering, including religious gatherings, critical of the ruling party. The government reportedly became increasingly distrustful of all gatherings and activities by individuals or groups perceived as opponents of the government. In July the ZRP questioned Bishop Ancelimo Magaya, leader of the Zimbabwe Divine Destiny Church, over the launch of the “Christian Vote” campaign aimed at mobilizing Christians to participate in the 2018 general election. In June the Catholic Bishops Conference released a pastoral letter on Pentecost Sunday in advance of the 2018 elections. The letter appealed for tolerance, national unity, peace, and stability while calling on the government to uphold the constitution and protect citizens’ political rights.

Most official state and school gatherings and functions included nondenominational Christian prayers, as did political party gatherings. In courts and when government officials entered office, individuals often swore on the Bible.

In February a parent challenged the constitutionality of a national pledge to be recited daily by students that had been introduced in 2016 by the MPSE. Religious leaders complained the ministry did not properly consult with religious communities, demanding the government revoke the national pledge. Following the February court filing, the Constitutional Court reserved judgment on the case while directing the ministry to consult further with religious leaders. Religious leaders criticized the ministry when it failed to do so.

Some Christian leaders and parents of students reportedly criticized the MPSE’s decision to include the study of Islam in the country’s new educational curriculum that was introduced in January. MPSE Minister Lazarus Dokora defended the decision, noting that students had previously learned about Islam, as well as other religions, before the new curriculum’s implementation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

As in previous years, some Christian groups blamed other Christian groups, particularly the Apostolic community, for encouraging marriage with girls as young as 14 and prohibiting children from receiving immunizations. On November 5, former First Lady Grace Mugabe spoke to members of the Apostolic community on the issue of child marriage.

In August the Islamic Republic of Iran’s cultural center in Harare organized and hosted a 10-day Interfaith Dialogue Forum to promote religious cohesion, coexistence, and tolerance between the Muslim and Christian communities. An MPSE representative gave closing remarks. Local religious leaders from Christian and Muslim groups participated, as well as representatives from Iran.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives met with Catholic, evangelical and other Protestant, Apostolic, and Muslim religious leaders and faith-based NGOs to discuss the status of religious freedom in the country and the role of faith communities in mitigating violence in advance of the 2018 election.

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Austrian Red Cross

Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research
and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien

T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583

F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589

info@ecoi.net

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