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2020 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. It prohibits political parties from preaching religious violence or hate. Laws regulating religious groups require them to register with the Ministry of Interior, and religious groups must meet certain standards, including a minimum number of adherents, in order to seek registration. In September, the Minister of Interior met with a delegation of the East-Central Africa Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to address the continued imprisonment of Church president Lameck Barishinga and other matters related to leadership issues within the Church, including approving a transitional leadership team chaired by David Bavugubusa. In February and May, police briefly detained the leader of Vivante Church, Pastor Artemon Nzambimana, and other pastors from the Church. In October, the government closed two Free Methodist churches in Cibitoke Province following clashes between the churches' leadership and congregations. In July, the government announced the suspension of requests to register new religious groups until further notice, citing the need to design new registration procedures. In May, the Conference of Catholic Bishops, citing the reports of their 2,716 observers during the May 20 general election, released a report concluding numerous election-related irregularities could affect the transparency and fairness of the elections results. On June 5, their public statement “rejoiced with the electorate” and congratulated then President-elect Ndayishimiye.

Religious leaders from different denominations took measures to promote peace and reconciliation. In January, members of the Interfaith Council organized a workshop with religious leaders to discuss the causes and consequences of conflicts in the country and to develop strategies that contributed toward sustainable peace and reconciliation. Media reported instances in which residents complained about noisy churches in their neighborhoods and sometimes clashed with church members.

The *Charge d’Affaires* and other U.S. embassy representatives encouraged community leaders, including representatives of major faith groups, to support religious tolerance and promote interfaith discussion of the collaborative role religious groups could play in disseminating a message of peace and reconciliation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.9 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2008 national census (the most recent), 62 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 21.6 percent Protestant, 2.5 percent Muslim, and 2.3 percent Seventh-day Adventist. Another 6.1 percent have no religious affiliation, and 3.7 percent belong to indigenous religious groups. The head of the Islamic Community of Burundi estimates Muslims constitute 10-12 percent of the population. The Muslim population lives mainly in urban areas. Most Muslims are Sunni. There are some Shia Muslims as well as a small Ismaili community. Groups that together constitute less than five percent of the population include Church of the Rock, Free Methodist, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Orthodox Christians, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Vivante, Hindus, and Jains. According to 2018 statistics from the Ministry of Interior, there are approximately 1,000 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.

The government recognizes and registers religious groups through a 2014 law governing the operational framework of religious groups, which states these organizations must register with the Ministry of Interior. There is a 20,000 Burundian franc (\$10) fee for registration. Each religious group must provide the denomination or affiliation of the institution, a copy of its bylaws, the address of its headquarters in the country, an address abroad if the local institution is part of a larger group, and the names and addresses of the association’s governing body and legal representative. Registration also entails identifying any property and bank accounts owned by the religious group. The ministry usually processes registration requests within two to four weeks. Leaders, administrators, or adherents of religious groups who continue to practice after their registration has been denied, or after a group has been dissolved or suspended, are subject to six months’ to five years’ imprisonment and a fine.

The law regulating religious groups incorporates additional specific registration requirements. Any new, independent religious group based in the country must have a minimum of 300 members. Foreign-based religious groups seeking to establish a presence in the country must have 500 members. The law prohibits membership in more than one religious group at the same time. The law prohibits foreigners from being part of executive and decision-making committees of religious groups at the national level.

The law on religious groups does not provide broad tax exemptions or other benefits for religious groups; however, the financial laws exempt from tax 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 official 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 religion classes or attend morality classes instead.

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

Government Practices

The president of the country’s chapter of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Lameck Barishinga, arrested in October 2019, remained in prison without formal charges. On September 24, according to media reports, the government met with a delegation from the East-Central Africa Division (ECD) of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, headquartered in Kenya, to discuss the imprisonment and other issues stemming from the ECD’s appointment of Barishinga as head of the Church after dismissing his predecessor in 2018. The government recognized the Church’s new four-person executive committee, appointed by the ECD in September to lead the Church until internal elections in July 2021, and during a joint press conference with the ECD delegation, urged members to accept the new leadership and avoid internal conflicts. On October 17, police intervened to prevent violence when former Church President Joseph Ndikubwayo led a group attempting to enter a church in Bujumbura during services held by David Bavugubusa, the chair of the new executive leadership committee; police arrested Ndikubwayo and an undetermined number of church members.

On November 10, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists released a statement thanking God for increasing religious liberty and freedom of conscience in the country, and expressing hope there would be even more progress in religious liberty activities in the country.

On February 27, police detained for two days Pastor Arthemion Nzambimana of Eglise Vivante (Living Church), who replaced former Pastor Edmond Kivuye after he fled Burundi in 2015. The police did not give a reason for the detention, but according to media and civil society representatives, the government likely disapproved of his leadership and intended to install Terence Mpanuwaka, a pastor considered close to the government, as the head of the Church. Police arrested Nzambimana again in May along with 10 other pastors from the Church and released them five days later after further questioning. Media reported police continued to interrogate Nzambimana periodically throughout the year, but that he was at liberty at year’s end.

On October 18, the government closed two Free Methodist churches in Cibitoke Province following clashes between members of the churches in which two persons were injured. Media reported tensions arose over internal conflicts between members of the churches’ leadership and congregations, which led to police intervening and arresting four church members for public disturbance.

Government officials routinely employed religious rhetoric before, during, and to a slightly lesser extent after the May national election in the context of political speeches, and invoked divine guidance for political and other important decisions. Opposition parties generally did not employ similar religious rhetoric during the campaign.

Pressure to join the Church of the Rock, run by former First Lady and ordained minister Denise Bucumi-Nkurunziza, significantly decreased according to observers, after President Evariste Ndayishimiye, a Catholic, assumed office in June.

President Ndayishimiye met with Protestant church leaders in October to discuss their roles in strengthening unity and social cohesion. According to media reports, the President urged them to manage peacefully conflicts within their churches because those conflicts sometimes led to public disorder. President Ndayishimiye also met with the Conference of Catholic Bishops in July and asked for their support of government development projects.

In July, the Ministry of Interior announced the suspension of requests to register new religious groups until further notice, citing the need for the ministry to design new registration and approval procedures. The ministry continued its 2019 suspension of construction of new churches and mosques in Bujumbura, which it stated was meant to guarantee order and provide better zoning regulation for the construction of future buildings.

Media reported weekly visits by government officials to various churches throughout the year, including by the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the National Assembly, and President of the Senate. In some instances, officials were given the opportunity to preach about scriptures and moral issues. The Senate President also served as the legal representative of the Free Methodist Church in the country.

The CNDD-FDD, 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 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.

The Conference of Catholic Bishops deployed 2,716 domestic observers across the country to monitor the presidential and legislative election held in May. After the election, the Conference of Catholic Bishops released a statement denouncing what the conference stated were many irregularities regarding the freedom and transparency of the electoral process, as well as fairness in the treatment of certain candidates and voters. The president of the Independent National Electoral Commission stated it was “surprising” that of the 39 organizations that observed the general elections, only the Catholic Church identified irregularities. The president of the electoral commission invited the Church to review the reports from the other 38 organizations, most of which were identified as progovernment civil society organizations, to assess their veracity. On June 5, the Conference of Catholic Bishops released a public statement in which they “rejoiced with the electorate” and congratulated then President-elect Ndayishimiye.

Religious leaders appointed by the government to the Body for the Regulation and Conciliation of Religious Confessions, established by the government in 2018 to coordinate with religious groups, continued to serve as president and vice president of the body, and a government employee served as executive secretary. The body continued its efforts to promote dialogue among and within religious denominations during the year but was constrained by resource limitations, according to the body’s president, Charles Nduwumukama, pastor of Eglise du Plein Evangile (Full Gospel 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 on imports of religious materials such as printed materials, wines for masses, and equipment to produce communion wafers. In September, the government encouraged all religious leaders engaged in commercial activities to pay taxes in compliance with tax law and procedures.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders from different denominations conducted activities to promote peace and reconciliation. In January, members of the Interfaith Council organized a workshop with religious leaders to discuss the causes and consequences of conflicts in the country and to develop strategies that contribute toward sustainable peace and reconciliation.

Media reported instances in which residents complained about noisy churches in their neighborhoods. On September 16, physical altercations erupted between members of a church in the Carama neighborhood of Bujumbura and nearby residents disturbed by noises coming from the church.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The *Charge d’Affaires* and other embassy officials regularly met with religious leaders of various faiths, such as the Anglican and Catholic Churches, 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 religious acceptance and promote interfaith discussion of the collaborative role religious groups could play in disseminating a message of peace and tolerance to the population.

On November 16, the embassy launched a project with Catholic Relief Services to strengthen the Inter-Religious Council of Burundi’s organizational and technical capacity to peacefully resolve differences among the people of the country.

Embassy officials continued to promote interfaith dialogue and supported efforts to include religious minority groups in U.S. programming, including a five-year, \$50 million initiative to improve living conditions for families in Muslim and Christian communities in Muyinga Province. When the project concluded in September, elements of its approach, particularly the model of faith-based engagement in both Christian and Muslim households, continued to be employed by local organizations that benefitted from the original project and now sustain its work.

In November, the embassy, working with the Inter-Religious Council of Burundi, launched a project to strengthen the organization's ability to help resolve differences peacefully, as well as to connect citizens to their new government. The project was developed to address lingering tensions from the May elections and to support faith leaders in their efforts to improve dialogue, tolerance, and social cohesion. Thirty-six high-level representatives of various religious congregations affiliated with the Inter-Religious Council, including Catholic and Protestant bishops and imams and sheikhs from the Muslim community, attended the launch ceremony. In one of the few times in recent history that the government has accepted and supported U.S.-funded activities in the political realm, government representatives spoke at the ceremony and expressed their appreciation for the role religious leaders had already played in easing tensions during and after the elections, offering their support for the new initiative on political and communal reconciliation.

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