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2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uganda

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and stipulates there shall be no state religion. It provides for freedom of belief, the right to practice and promote any religion, and the right to belong to and participate in the practices of any religious organization in a manner consistent with the constitution. The government requires religious groups to register. In October, President Yoweri Museveni signed into law the Computer Misuse Amendment Act 2022, which criminalizes as hate speech forms of expression that “ridicule, degrade, or demean” individuals based on their religion.

Members of the Muslim community stated that security agencies unfairly singled out Muslims for arrest and detention while enforcing antiterrorism operations. Prominent members of the community accused the government of detaining Muslim leaders without trial for terrorism-related offences. The Minister of Internal Affairs stated in August that he instructed security agencies to cease making arrests without adequate investigations. Evangelical leaders reported that government officials closed evangelical churches in remote areas that failed to comply with registration requirements. Evangelical ministers also stated that government officials in the capital, Kampala, threatened to expel evangelical street preachers from the city. The Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) reported that the government discriminated against Muslims in its education policies by declining to recognize the curriculum in Muslim seminaries and by appointing Christian teachers to lead Muslim public schools. The government made financial and material donations to the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and evangelical churches, as well as Muslim communities.

The UMSC and Muslim civil society groups reported that elite Christian schools and universities discriminated against Muslim students in their admissions. Christian members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community reported that most Christian ministers in evangelical, Catholic, and Anglican churches openly condemned the community, coerced LGBTQI+ members to endure so-called conversion therapy, barred them from openly expressing themselves, and in some cases barred them from attending religious activities.

U.S. embassy representatives regularly discussed religious freedom issues with government officials. The Ambassador met on several occasions with President Museveni and emphasized the government’s obligations to respect the rights of all persons, regardless of religious affiliation. At the start of Ramadan on April 1, the embassy used its social media platforms to promote religious tolerance, charity, and unity and communicate greetings from the Secretary of State and the

Ambassador. On April 13, the Ambassador hosted an iftar and highlighted the importance of peace, justice, compassion, tolerance, and commitment to family and community. The embassy also facilitated an April 25 iftar for former participants of U.S. exchange programs that was organized by an alumna who uses arts to address violent extremism, gender-based violence, and other community challenges. The Ambassador met with leaders in the Jewish community, Muslim community, Anglican Church, and evangelical communities to underscore U.S. government support for religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 46.2 million (midyear 2022). According to the most recent census, conducted in 2014, 82 percent of the population is Christian. The largest Christian group is Catholic at 39 percent of the population, 32 percent are Anglican, and 11 percent are Pentecostal Christian. The census reports Muslims constitute 14 percent of the population. The UMSC states that Muslims (primarily Sunni) are closer to 35 percent of the population. There are also a small number of Shia Muslims, mostly in Kampala and the eastern part of the country, particularly in the Mayuge and Bugiri Districts. Other religious groups, which collectively constitute less than 5 percent of the population, include Seventh-day Adventists, adherents of Indigenous beliefs, Baptists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Orthodox Christians, Hindus, Jews, Baha'is, and those with no religious affiliation.

According to the Indian Association in Uganda, the largest non-African ethnic population is of Indian origin or descent, most of whom are Hindu. The Jewish community of approximately 2,000 members is mainly concentrated in Mbale Town, in the eastern region of the country. Religious groups are generally dispersed evenly across the country, although there are large concentrations of Muslims in the eastern and northwestern parts of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and establishes there shall be no state religion. It provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the right to practice and promote any religion, as well as to belong to and participate in the practices of any religious body or organization in a manner consistent with the constitution. The constitution also stipulates the government may limit these rights by measures that are "reasonably justifiable for dealing with a state of emergency." The constitution prohibits the creation of political parties based on religion.

The penal code criminalizes "disturbance of religious gatherings" and "wounding religious feelings." In October, the government adopted the Computer Misuse Amendment Act 2022, which criminalizes online hate speech, including forms of expression that "ridicule, degrade, or demean" individuals based on their religion. Persons convicted for breaching such provisions are liable to a maximum penalty of 15 million shillings (\$4,000) or seven years' imprisonment.

The country's coat of arms bears the motto "For God and My Country." The law prohibits secular broadcasters from stating opinions on religious doctrine or faith. The law also prohibits radio and television stations from broadcasting advertisements that "promote psychic practices or practices related to the occult," material that encourages persons to change their faith, and content that uses or

contains blasphemy, which is not defined by law. The government, however, seldom enforces these provisions.

The government requires religious groups to register with the Uganda Registration Services Bureau and then to secure a five-year operating license from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The bureau requires faith-based organizations to provide a copy of a land title or proof of ownership of premises; a copy of the board resolution to start a faith-based organization; a copy of the memorandum and articles of association spelling out what the organization intends to do; allotment of shareholding; and copies of the national identity cards of the directors. The government does not require the larger and more historically established religious groups – including Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Seventh-day Adventist groups, and the UMSC – to obtain operating licenses.

The law exempts registered religious groups and their nonprofit activities from direct taxation.

Religious instruction in public schools is optional at the postprimary level. Primary schools must teach either Christianity, Islam, or both in their social studies classes. Many schools teach both and allow students to select which religion class to attend. Secondary schools may choose which, if any, religious studies to incorporate into their curricula, and students who choose to attend that school must take the course offered. Primary school students may choose to answer questions about either Islam or Christianity during the religion portion of the national social studies exams. The state has separate curricula for world religions, including Christianity and Islam, and all schools must adhere to the state-approved curriculum for each religion they choose to teach. A majority of students in the country attend schools run by religious organizations.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

The Muslim community reported that security agencies unfairly singled out Muslims for arrest and detention while enforcing antiterrorism operations. In March, local media reported that plainclothes security officers arrested Muslim cleric Umar Kabonge Ajobe and two others in Luweero District on accusations that they were assembling explosives on behalf of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – Democratic Republic of the Congo (ISIS-DRC) terrorist organization. Security agencies continued to hold Ajobe without trial at year's end. On August 25, Muslim leaders met Minister for Internal Affairs Kahinda Otafiire and stated that police and military officers had arrested several Muslim clerics after accusing them of promoting radicalization but failed to arraign them in court or present any evidence to substantiate the allegations. Otafiire told the Muslim clerics that he had instructed police to refrain from making arrests before making sufficient investigations.

Evangelical leaders under the umbrella group Born Again Faith Uganda (BAFU) reported that government officials in western and eastern regions of the country closed some evangelical churches for failing to meet registration requirements. BAFU officials stated that the government had failed to enact a registration procedure for religious groups and in turn forced the groups to register using a procedure designated for commercial enterprises. BAFU officials also said government officials had failed to sensitize religious groups to these registration procedures. As a consequence, some evangelical ministers in remote areas operated without registration, which led resident district commissioners to close their ministries.

On February 24, local media reported that the resident city commissioner in Kampala, Hussein Hudu, instructed evangelical street preachers to cease operations within 30 days. According to local media,

Hudu stated that this was part of a series of measures aimed at “sanitizing” the city, including removing street vendors and beggars. BAFU officials reported that the directive was a violation of the right to freedom of worship for evangelical Christians. On February 26, local media reported that Hudu had rescinded his directive.

The Muslim community reported that the government discriminated against Muslims in its education policies. The UMSC stated that the government failed to pay salaries to some public school teachers of Islamic Religious Education. The UMSC also reported that the ministry of education appointed Christian teachers as headteachers in Muslim public schools, overlooking qualified Muslim teachers, and it demanded government action to select eligible Muslim candidates for these positions. The UMSC also stated that the government’s National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC) did not recognize the curriculum being taught in Muslim seminaries, yet it recognized the curriculum of Christian seminaries; Muslim and Christian seminaries also included high schools. The UMSC stated that NCDC’s position excluded students in Muslim-run high schools from accreditation that would allow the students to pursue university-level education or jobs requiring a high school diploma. On August 6, local media reported that ministry of education officials declined to adopt affirmative action in recruitment of Muslim teachers, stating that their recruitment had been and would continue to be based on merit. On May 1, local media reported that Minister of Education and Sports Janet Museveni had instituted a committee to study allegations of the marginalization of Muslims in the education sector. The committee had not reported its findings by year’s end.

In October, President Museveni signed into law the Computer Misuse Amendment Act 2022, which criminalizes as hate speech forms of expression that “ridicule, degrade, or demean” individuals based on their religion, with a maximum penalty of 15 million shillings (\$4,000), seven years’ imprisonment, or both.

The government extended financial and material support to religious activities. The President donated vehicles to newly consecrated clerics in the Catholic, Anglican, and evangelical churches. The government donated 1.6 billion shillings (\$431,000) to Catholic and Anglican churches to enable them to organize the annual Martyrs Day pilgrimage in memory of 45 19th-century Christian converts in the kingdom of Buganda whom the king killed for refusing to renounce their faith. The government had suspended activities to mark the pilgrimage in 2020 and 2021 as part of measures to combat the spread of COVID-19. The government also donated 2.5 billion shillings (\$673,000) to the UMSC to enable it to organize elections.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The UMSC and Allied Muslim Youth Uganda reported on discrimination against Muslims in admission processes at some elite Christian schools and universities. They stated that these schools often admitted Christian students who lacked the requisite admission qualifications at the expense of Muslim students who met the qualifications.

Christian members of the LGBTQI+ community reported that most Christian ministers in the evangelical, Catholic, and Anglican churches openly condemned the community, coerced LGBTQI+ members to endure so-called conversion therapy, barred members from openly expressing themselves, and in some cases barred them from attending religious activities. Christian LGBTQI+ groups reported that many churches barred openly transgender persons from accessing church premises. The head of the Interreligious Council of Uganda also stated that “we do not have any

denomination in our family that is agreeing with homosexuality ... so we will continue to keep those values."

The Interreligious Council convened interfaith sessions to campaign for tolerance, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence among religious groups, and in particular to defuse tensions between communities in eastern DRC, where the Ugandan military was engaged in conflict with ISIS-DRC.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador met on several occasions with President Museveni and the Ministers of Internal affairs, Justice and Constitutional Affairs, and Foreign Affairs and emphasized the government's obligations to respect the rights of all persons, without regard to religious affiliation. On April 13, the Ambassador hosted an iftar for leaders of the Muslim community at which she highlighted the importance of peace, justice, compassion, tolerance, and commitment to family and community. The embassy also facilitated an April 25 iftar for former participants of U.S. exchange programs that was organized by an alumna who uses arts to address violent extremism, gender-based violence, and other community challenges. On May 3, the Ambassador joined the Muslim community at Kibuli Mosque to mark Eid al Fitr, at which she underscored the importance of togetherness and the spirit of community. On July 21, the Ambassador participated in a dialogue on religious institutions as drivers of inclusion hosted by the Universal Coalition of Affirming Africans Uganda that brought together religious leaders and member of the LGBTQI+ community, among others. On December 20, a senior embassy official attended a Hannukah celebration hosted by Chabad of Uganda to demonstrate embassy support for religious diversity and traditions.

Embassy representatives regularly engaged with religious leaders. The Ambassador met with leaders in the Jewish community, Muslim community, Catholic church, Anglican Church, and evangelical communities to underscore U.S. government support for religious freedom and tolerance.

At the start of Ramadan on April 1, the embassy used its social media platforms to promote religious tolerance, charity, and unity, and to communicate greetings from the Secretary of State and the Ambassador. The embassy also used social media to communicate greetings for Yom Kippur, Easter, and Christmas.

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Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of
Origin and Asylum Research and
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Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041
Wien
T +43 1 589 00 583
F +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
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F.A.Q.
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