

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	369
Land:	Uganda
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uganda
Udgivet:	10. juni 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	2. juli 2020

Document #2031211

USDOS – US Department of State

2019 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 to belong to and participate in the practices of any religious organization in a manner consistent with the constitution. 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. The government requires religious groups to register. On July 24, the military intelligence agency, Chieftaincy of Military Intelligence (CMI), raided the Agapeo International Pentecostal Church in the Kibuye suburb of Kampala and arrested 40 Rwandan citizens attending a church service. The CMI continued to hold the Rwandans at year’s end without charge. The government restricted activities of religious groups it defined as “illegal” and arrested some individuals it accused of running churches that prevented followers from following a “normal” life. On January 30, local media reported the Uganda Police Force (UPF) banned Bishop Bataringaya Okumu, an evangelical Christian minister, from operating his church, Jesus the Living Stone Ministries, for participating in “illegal activities.” The UPF noted Okumu blocked his followers from seeking health care, promising he would heal them through prayer. The government stated in September that it was still holding consultations before introducing a policy to regulate religious groups; the draft policy received strong opposition from some evangelical Christian churches. Local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and media reported that the government disproportionately and unfairly arrested and imprisoned Muslims. The Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) stated the government continued to discriminate against Muslims when hiring for public positions.

A Christian man filed a lawsuit against all Muslims to prevent them from calling God by the name Allah.

U.S. embassy representatives regularly discussed human rights issues, including religious freedom, with government officials at every level. The embassy organized an interfaith conference at which a U.S. Muslim cleric promoted interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. During Ramadan, the embassy hosted an iftar, inviting political and

religious leaders from all faiths to attend. During the event, the Charge d’Affaires urged political and religious leaders to embrace religious diversity. The embassy also used its social media platforms to encourage respect for religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 42.2 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the most recent census, conducted in 2014, 82 percent of the population is Christian. The largest Christian group is Roman Catholic with 39 percent; 32 percent is Anglican, and 11 percent Pentecostal Christian. According to official government estimates, Muslims constitute 14 percent of the population. The UMSC estimates Muslims (primarily Sunni) are closer to 20 percent of the population. Other religious groups, which collectively constitute less than 5 percent of the population, include Seventh-day Adventists, adherents of indigenous beliefs, Baptists, Orthodox Christians, Hindus, Jews, 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. Generally, religious groups are dispersed evenly across the country, although there are concentrations of Muslims in eastern and northern 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 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. The government, however, seldom enforces these provisions of the law.

The government requires religious groups to register to obtain legal entity status. According to the Uganda Registration Services Bureau (URSB), the government requires faith-based organizations to register as nonprofit organizations with the bureau and then to secure a five-year operating license from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The URSB 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 national identity cards of the directors. Although there is no formal mechanism to request an exemption from the requirement to obtain an operating license, in practice larger religious groups, including the Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches, and the UMSC are de facto exempt, and the government does not require them to obtain an operating license.

Religious instruction in public schools is optional at the post-primary level. Primary schools must teach either Christianity, Islam, or both in their social studies classes. Many schools teach both and let students select which one 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 either questions about Islam or Christianity during the religion portion of the national social studies exams. The state has separate curricula for a number of world religions, including Christianity and Islam, and all schools must adhere to the state-approved curriculum for each religion they choose to teach.

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

Government Practices

On July 24, local media reported the CMI raided the Agapeo International Pentecostal Church in the Kibuye suburb of Kampala and arrested 40 Rwandan citizens attending a church service. The Uganda People's Defense Forces and the UPF confirmed the arrests but declined to comment, saying that would jeopardize investigations. Local media speculated that the army raided the church suspecting its members to be Rwandan intelligence operatives. The CMI continued to hold the 40 Rwandans at year's end without charge.

On January 30, local media reported the UPF in Gulu District banned Bishop Bataringaya Okumu, an evangelical Christian minister, from operating his church, Jesus the Living Stone Ministries, for participating in “illegal activities.” The UPF stated Okumu “practiced a doctrine that barred his followers from living a normal life.” The UPF said Okumu blocked his followers from seeking health care, promising he would heal them through prayer, including a patient with HIV who died at Okumu's church after stopping his medication. Local media reported that a week after the UPF ban, Okumu's followers returned and resumed operations at his church, which the reports said led the nearby community to set the church premises on fire. The UPF put out the fire, arrested Okumu for “disobeying lawful authority,” and later released him.

The UMSC stated in October the government continued to discriminate against Muslims in appointments to public positions and in the deployment of social programs. NGOs reported sections of the Muslim population believed the government singled out Muslims as potential perpetrators of high-profile crimes and often arrested them with no evidence. The NGOs reported prolonged detention without trial, torture, and

inhumane treatment of Muslim suspects in the mideastern districts of Iganga and Mayuge continued. On September 12, according to local media, military intelligence officers beat and rearrested four Muslim suspects charged with terrorism and murder outside a courtroom immediately after the court had released them on bail. The military officers justified the action saying the four were “peace violators” and said they had new secret intelligence justifying their arrest.

A group of evangelical Christian ministers throughout the year repeatedly said they would resist a draft government policy that would require religious groups to submit information about their followers’ “social-economic transformation” to the government, submit annual financial reports, and impose minimum academic qualifications for religious leaders (although the specific educational requirements remained undefined). President Yoweri Museveni met evangelical Christian ministers on September 23 and stated the government would not enact a new policy, which had been under discussion for six years, until it had consulted all religious leaders.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On October 23, media reported Ivan Samuel Ssebadduka, who referred to himself as a monotheistic Christian, petitioned the Constitutional Court seeking to prevent all Muslims from using the name Allah when referring to God. The case was ongoing at year’s end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives regularly discussed human rights issues, including religious freedom, with government officials at every level. In May the embassy sponsored the Civilizations Exchange and Cooperation Foundation to host the Better Understanding for a Better World interfaith conference, where the organization’s head, a U.S. imam, engaged faith leaders, youth, and women to promote intercultural and interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. During a May 14 iftar hosted by the embassy, the Charge d’Affaires urged religious and political leaders to embrace religious diversity. In July the embassy used its social media platforms to highlight the U.S.-sponsored Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom and to call for greater respect of religious freedom for all.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2019)



Country:

Uganda

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State \(/en/source/11558.html\)](#)

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/uganda/>
(<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/uganda/>)

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

10 June 2020

Document ID:

2031211

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

