

ZAMBIA 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares the country a Christian nation but also provides for religious freedom and upholds the country's multireligious composition. It prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience and belief.

During the year, tensions increased between the government and the Roman Catholic Church over the church's criticism of governance and human rights issues. In July, in an effort to reduce tension and reconcile with the church, President Hakainde Hichilema sent a cabinet-level delegation to meet with Catholic Archbishop Ignatius Chama. Also in July, Member of Parliament Jay Emmanuel Banda introduced a motion for the government to reinstate the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs, which he said was necessary to restore the nation's Christian identity. The National Assembly rejected the proposal. During the year, the government continued its policy of strengthening the country's identity as a Christian nation. The government also developed self-regulatory frameworks for church and religious umbrella groups, promoted interdenominational dialogue, preserved religious heritage sites, and coordinated public religious celebrations.

Incidents of violence against, and killings of, suspected practitioners of witchcraft continued, particularly against elderly persons.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials met with government

officials and religious figures to discuss the multifaceted issues surrounding the regulation of religious groups and the detrimental effects of religious justification in perpetuating the mistreatment of marginalized communities. The embassy also used social media to highlight religious festivals.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 20.2 million (mid-year 2023). According to Zambia Statistics Agency (ZamStats) estimates, 95.5 percent of the country's population is Christian; 75.3 percent identify as Protestant and 20.2 percent as Roman Catholic. Protestant groups with the largest numbers of adherents include the Anglican Church, evangelical Christians, and Pentecostal groups. According to ZamStats, approximately 2.7 percent of the population is Muslim, with smaller numbers of Hindus, Baha'is, Buddhists, Jews, and Sikhs. Even smaller numbers adhere to other belief systems, including Indigenous religions and witchcraft, or hold no religious beliefs. Many persons combine Christianity and Indigenous beliefs.

The Muslim community is predominantly Sunni, with small groups of Ismaili and Twelver Shia Muslims. According to the Lusaka Muslim Society, there are approximately 100,000 Muslims in the country, including Congolese and Somali refugees. Both Sunni and Shia Muslims are primarily concentrated in Lusaka, Eastern, and Copperbelt Provinces. Many are immigrants or the children of immigrants from South Asia, Somalia, and the Middle East who have acquired citizenship. Hindus, mostly of South Asian descent, are located largely in Eastern, Copperbelt, and Lusaka Provinces and estimate the size of their community at 10,000 as of 2019 (most recent information). There are small numbers of Jews, mostly in Lusaka and Northern Province.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious

Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares the country a Christian nation but upholds freedom of conscience, belief, and religion for all persons. It prohibits discrimination based on religion and provides for the right of individuals to manifest and propagate religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. It also protects the freedom of individuals to change their religion or belief and states that no one shall be compelled to take an oath or perform acts contrary to his or her religious beliefs. The law prescribes legal recourse against, and penalties of fines and imprisonment for, violations of religious freedom.

Under the law, naming or accusing a person of being a witch or wizard is a criminal offense punishable either by fine or imprisonment of up to one year, while those who profess knowledge of witchcraft may face up to two years' imprisonment. The law has an exception for those who report to police any person alleged to be professing knowledge of, or practicing, witchcraft.

All religious groups are required to affiliate with an umbrella body, often referred to as a "mother body," which gathers individual churches and denominations under one administrative authority. There are 14 mother bodies, seven Christian and seven non-Christian. These are the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops (ZCCB), Council of Churches in Zambia (CCZ), Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ), Independent Churches of Zambia, Apostles Council of Churches, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Christian Missions in Many Lands, Islamic Supreme Council of Zambia (ISCZ), Hindu Association of Zambia, Guru Nanak Council of Zambia, Jewish Board of

Deputies Zambia, Rastafarians, Council for Zambia Jewry, and Baha'i Faith in Zambia. The largest mother bodies are the ZCCB, EFZ, and CCZ.

The Minister of Home Affairs and Internal Security retains the discretion to register any religious entity. To register, a group must have a unique name, a recommendation letter from its mother body, and a document listing the clergy's professional qualifications from a "recognized and reputable" theological school, but the government provides no specific definition or list of qualifying institutions. The Office of the Chief Registrar of Societies then conducts a preliminary assessment of the applicant group's authenticity and religious purpose as well as a security check. Religious groups must pay a one-time fee of 3,000 kwacha (\$120) to establish registration and 100 kwacha (\$4) every year to retain it. Registered religious groups are also required to adhere to laws pertaining to employment practices and criminal conduct.

The Minister of Home Affairs and Internal Security has the legal authority to revoke the registration of religious groups. Grounds for revocation include failure to pay registration fees or the Minister's assessment that the group has professed purposes, or has taken, or intends to take actions that run counter to the interests of "peace, welfare, or good order." Groups may appeal the Minister's finding in the courts. The government has the authority to levy fines and prison sentences of up to seven years against unregistered religious groups and their members.

The law provides for privileged tax treatment for public benefit organizations, including religious groups, provided they are established for the promotion of religion, education, and relief of poverty or other distress.

The constitution grants religious groups the right to establish and maintain

private schools and provide religious instruction to members of their religious communities. The constitution states, “Except with his own consent, or, if he is a minor, the consent of his guardian, no person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if that instruction, ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own.” Despite the language in the constitution, the government requires religious instruction in all schools from grades one through nine. Students may request education in their own religion and may opt out of religious instruction only if the school is not able to accommodate their request. Religious education after grade nine is optional and is not offered at all schools. The religious curriculum focuses on Christian teachings but also incorporates comparative studies of Islam, Hinduism, and traditional beliefs.

The Department of Immigration under the Ministry of Home Affairs and Internal Security has a mandate to approve or deny permits and visas for travelers coming into the country for religious activities. For any foreign clergy entering the country, the sponsoring religious group must provide proof of legal registration as a religious group in the country, a recommendation letter from their aligned mother body, and clearance from clergy in the country of origin. This documentation is presented to the Department of Immigration.

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

Government Practices

The Catholic Church continued to criticize the government’s handling of governance and human rights issues. In a media briefing, Minister of

Technology and Science Felix Mutati, a Catholic, reported that on July 14, the President sent a delegation of Catholic members of his cabinet to meet with the Catholic Archbishop of Kasama, Ignatius Chama, who is also ZCCB President, to prevent further escalation of tension between the government and the church and to reconcile with the church. Following the meeting, the President reported on his Facebook page that he had met with Archbishop Chama and other members of the ZCCB at an undisclosed location. As a result of the meeting, according to civil society representatives, tension between the government and the church appeared to have eased.

Through statements by the President and various government ministers, the government confirmed Zambia's position as a Christian nation, and reiterated its willingness to continue partnering with the religious community in ensuring Zambia upheld "Christian values." In a speech read on the Vice President's behalf on July 1, Mines and Minerals Development Minister Paul Kabuswe, said the government remained committed to working with and supporting the religious community in its efforts to provide moral guidance and charity to the people.

Throughout the year, the government expressed commitment to developing self-regulatory frameworks for church and religious umbrella groups, promoting interdenominational dialogue, preserving religious heritage sites, and coordinating public religious celebrations, through the Office of the Vice President. These included the commemoration of Zambia's declaration as a Christian nation (December 29), the National Day of Prayer, Fasting, and Repentance (October 18), and World Prayer Day (first Friday in March).

In July, Petauke Central Independent Member of Parliament Jay Emmanuel Banda introduced a motion in the National Assembly to reinstitute the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs, which the government

dismantled in 2021, because he said the country had lost its Christian values and the only way to restore them was to bring back the ministry. “We have lost Christian values whereby we are complaining and seeing people sodomizing each other and others marching in support of homosexuality,” he said. Former Minister of National Guidance and Religious Affairs Godfridah Sumaili supported Banda’s motion and said the government should reestablish the ministry because the country’s morals had deteriorated. On July 26, the National Assembly voted down the motion.

The government again did not register any new mother bodies during the year. A moratorium imposed in 2019 on the registration of new churches and religious groups remained in force pending adoption of a new policy on minimum standards for churches and religious groups that would be included in the government’s framework for registering churches. At year’s end, the government had not announced a new policy.

On October 18, the country held the National Day of Prayer, Fasting, Repentance, and Reconciliation under the slogan, “Building Zambia for Greater Development Through Prayer, Unity, and Hard Work.” In a speech delivered on the President’s behalf to commemorate the day, Vice President Mutale Nalumango reaffirmed the country’s status as a Christian nation and called on citizens to strive to be ethical, prayerful, and God-fearing in their daily conduct. In response to opposition criticism that President Hichilema did not attend the event, State House Chief of Communication Clayson Hamasaka said the President was not legally obliged to attend a public event and that “Christians are free to commemorate it wherever they are.” Other senior government officials and religious leaders attended prayer services across the country that day.

On December 29, the country commemorated its 1992 declaration as a

Christian nation. During the event to mark the declaration, President Hichilema emphasized the critical role Christianity played in shaping the country's values and fostering peace.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Media sources reported incidents of violence against, and killings of, suspected practitioners of witchcraft, particularly elderly persons. For example, on July 20, unknown persons in Chirundu shot and killed Eliot Siamunkungwe, a 55-year-old man on suspicion of practicing witchcraft. In February, unknown persons assaulted Margaret Nabulyato, a 72-year-old woman of Chikaza Munyama chiefdom in Iteshi-Tezhi District after accusing her of being a witch, state media reported. According to reports, Nabulyato told a Human Rights Commission public hearing that the area chief ordered her to pay a fine of two heads of cattle and 1,000 kwacha (\$40) as the penalty for practicing witchcraft.

Relations between the Zambian-born Muslim community and Muslims of foreign origin remained strained. According to a senior Zambian-born Muslim leader, immigrant Muslims primarily from South and East Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East did not recognize the ISCZ as their governing body because it was led by Zambian-born Muslims.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

During the year, the U.S. Ambassador met with government officials, including the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Home Affairs and Internal Security, to discuss the multifaceted issues surrounding the

regulation of religious groups and the detrimental effects of religious justification in perpetuating the mistreatment of marginalized communities. In May, embassy officials engaged religious leaders from the Christian and Muslim communities. With Muslim leaders, they discussed key issues of concern such as the ongoing dispute over the leadership of the ISCZ. With Christian leaders, they discussed the role of the church in supporting the country's development and the influence of the church in shaping public opinion, particularly relating to marginalized groups. The embassy used social media to highlight interfaith events such as the U.S. Vice President lighting a menorah at the White House during Hanukkah. Additionally, the embassy posted social media messages on Zambia's National Prayer Day and Christmas.