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USDOS – US Department of State

2018 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 occasionally monitored public events, prayer rallies, church congregations, and religiously affiliated nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) perceived to be critical of the government. Christian aid organizations and local NGOs focused on memorializing victims of the 1980s Gukurahundi mass killings said security officials monitored their activities with increased frequency in the lead-up to the July general elections. In June Pastor Evan Mawarire of His Generation Church filed a \$65,000 lawsuit against the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) for unlawful arrest and detention at the height of his 2017 antigovernment protests. In May a magistrate acquitted Pastor Patrick Mugadza of insulting persons of a certain race or religion after an October 2017 Constitutional Court ruling stated Mugadza “insulted the Christian religion.” In April the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe banned all radio and state-run television stations from programs advertising prophets and traditional healing. Multiple church organizations released letters appealing for tolerance, national unity, peace, reconciliation, healing, and stability while calling on the government to uphold the constitution and protect citizens' political rights prior to and following the July elections.

As in previous years, some groups criticized Christian groups with indigenous beliefs, particularly the apostolic community, for encouraging child marriage and prohibiting immunizations.

The embassy raised freedom of speech and human rights with government officials. Embassy representatives met with religious leaders and faith-based organizations to discuss the role of faith communities in mitigating violence in advance of and promoting peace and unity following the July election.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 14 million (July 2018 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 Baha'is.

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, educational, recreational, sporting, or charitable purposes.” The criminal code prohibits statements that are “insulting” or “grossly provocative” and that cause offense to persons of a particular race, tribe, place of origin, color, creed or religion, or intend to cause such offense. Individuals convicted under this law are subject to a fine, imprisonment for a period not exceeding one year, or both.

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 sets curricula for public primary and secondary schools. Many public primary schools require a religious education course focusing on Christianity, but including other religious groups with an emphasis on 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 faith-based NGOs, have no legal requirements 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

Civil society organizations reported the government used security laws to monitor public events and prayer rallies of religious groups, but there were no reports of specific incidents or disruptions. In June Pastor Evan Mawarire of His Generation Church filed a \$65,000 lawsuit against the ZRP for unlawful arrest and detention at the height of his 2017 antigovernment protests. In 2017, ZRP officers arrested Mawarire during a prayer meeting he led with University of Zimbabwe students; however, in September 2017, a magistrate judge acquitted him of charges of intending to promote public violence and disorderly conduct.

In May a magistrate judge acquitted Pastor Patrick Mugadza of insulting persons of a certain race or religion, finding the state failed to prove the case against him beyond a reasonable doubt. In January 2017, police arrested Mugadza, the leader of the Remnant Pentecostal Church, after he prophesized that then-President Mugabe would die in October of that year. In October 2017, the Constitutional Court dismissed Mugadza's application to stop his prosecution for making the prophecy, stating Mugadza “insulted the Christian religion.”

Christian aid organizations and local NGOs focused on memorializing victims of the 1980s Gukurahundi mass killings of mainly Ndebele civilians said security officials monitored their activities with increased frequency in the lead-up to the July general elections, particularly in areas considered strongholds of the political opposition.

In August NGO Ibhetshu LikaZulu Secretary General Mbolu Fuzwayo reported receiving anonymous threatening telephone calls for publicly condemning the government forces' 1980s Gukurahundi mass killings. Ibhetshu LikaZulu is an NGO advocacy and

protection group in Matabeleland South that organizes memorial and prayer services to commemorate the victims. Security forces did not interfere with Ibhetshu LikaZulu activities.

Religious activities and events remained free from POSA restrictions, but the government continued to categorize as political some public gatherings, including religious gatherings such as prayer vigils and memorial services, perceived to be critical of the ruling party. Multiple church organizations, including the Churches Convergence on Peace, Zimbabwe Council of Churches, and Catholic Bishops' Conference, released letters appealing for tolerance, national unity, peace, reconciliation, healing, and stability while calling on the government to uphold the constitution and protect citizens' political rights prior to and following the July elections.

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 January media reported the government was considering revising the national pledge to make it applicable to every citizen, rather than limiting it to schools. The pledge begins with “Almighty God in whose hands our future lies, I salute the national flag, I commit to honesty and dignity of hard work.” Some educators objected to the pledge, saying it was actually a prayer, and some Christian groups objected saying they feared the government intended to replace the Lord's Prayer in schools with the national pledge.

In April the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe banned all radio and state-run television stations from programs advertising prophets and traditional healing. Authorities said the ban was a response to increases in fraud, such as Pastor Tito Watts, whom authorities arrested for selling tickets to heaven. Government officials stated the constitution protected freedom of worship, but the regulatory authority retained the right to protect believers from abuse. Media reports stated some church leaders welcomed the ban because false prophets sometimes use their status to rape or defraud congregants.

Churches reported working with Zimbabwe Prison and Correctional Services to help improve living conditions in prison facilities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

As in previous years, some Christian groups, such as the United Methodist Church and the Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust, criticized child marriages and immunization prohibitions in some apostolic religious groups.

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, the role of faith communities in mitigating violence around the election, and the role of religious leaders in political reconciliation. For example, in October embassy representatives discussed a church council's three-year strategic plan to support political reconciliation and national healing in the country and ways to strengthen constitutional democracy through political and economic reforms.

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