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2010 Report on International Religious Freedom - Rwanda

[Covers the period from July 1, 2009, to June 30, 2010]

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom; however, there continued to be concerns about the treatment of some minority religious groups. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. Local authorities continued to arrest and detain Jehovah's Witnesses who declined, for religious reasons, to participate in night patrols. School officials temporarily expelled Jehovah's Witnesses students for refusing to sing the national anthem.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 10,169 square miles and a population of 10.7 million.

According to a 2002 census, Roman Catholics constitute 57 percent of the population, main-line denomination Protestants, 26 percent; Seventh-day Adventists, 11 percent; and Muslims, 5 percent. Groups that constitute less than 1 percent of the population include indigenous religious practitioners and Baha'is. There are a growing number of Jehovah's Witnesses (approximately 18,000), evangelical Protestants, and Christian-linked schismatic religious groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws provide for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The constitution protects the rights of individuals to choose or change their religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion or faith, which is punishable by law.

The penal code provides for small fines and/or imprisonment of up to six months for anyone who interferes with a religious ceremony or with a religious minister in the exercise of professional duties.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter, Assumption, Eid-al-Fitr, and Christmas.

The constitution prohibits the formation of political organizations based on race, ethnic group, tribe, clan, region, sex, religion, or any other division that may give rise to discrimination.

The law regulates public meetings and establishes fines or imprisonment for unauthorized public meetings, including assemblies for religious reasons. If a group was registered, no prior authorization for their meetings was required although authorities legally may require advance notice for outdoor rallies, demonstrations, and meetings.

For night meetings, including religious meetings, local authorities required advance notification, particularly those ceremonies involving amplified music and boisterous celebrations.

All nonprofit organizations, including churches and religious organizations, must register with the Ministry of Local Government and the Ministry of Justice to acquire legal status. The government generally imposed difficult and burdensome registration and renewal requirements for organizations, including religious organizations, as well as time-consuming requirements to submit annual financial and activity reports. Although authorities have not granted official legal status to any religious groups pending passage of a religious communities law under consideration in parliament since 2008, religious organizations received "provisional authorization" by presenting their objectives and plans of action to local and district authorities. Therefore, some religious organizations operated without full legal protection.

Government officials presiding over wedding ceremonies generally required couples to take an oath while touching the national flag, a practice to which Jehovah's Witnesses objected on religious grounds. This practice made it difficult for members to marry legally, since few officials were willing to perform the ceremony without the flag requirement. For some Jehovah's Witnesses, placing their hands on a Bible on top of the flag was an acceptable alternative.

Every foreign missionary in the country must have a religious/missionary visa and a foreign identity card. Specific requirements to obtain this type of visa include: a completed application, a visa application letter signed by the legal representative, a signed CV, an authorization letter from their parent organization, and a fee of \$87 (51,288 rwf). The renewable, multiple-entry religious/missionary visa is valid for one year.

The government required all students in primary school and the first three years of secondary education in public schools to take religion class, which covers various religions, as a required extracurricular subject. The law allowed parents, for religious reasons, to enroll their children in private religious schools.

The government did not designate religion on passports or national identity cards nor does the government permit individuals to reflect their religious identity through headress in official photos for passports, driver's licenses, or other official documents.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom; however, there continued to be concerns about the treatment of some minority religious groups. During the April 2010 memorial week commemorating the 1994 genocide, the government limited the conduct of certain celebratory activities, including baptisms.

There continued to be tensions between the government and the Catholic Church about the role of current and former church officials during the 1994 genocide.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Local government officials continued to arrest and detain Jehovah's Witnesses, most often for refusing to participate in security patrols.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested and held for four days in Nyanza for failure to provide evidence of voting in the September 2008 legislative elections; they were released shortly thereafter.

According to media reports, authorities briefly detained at least 14 members of a break-away, unregistered faction of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in June 2010 and 20 members of another break-away, unregistered faction of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in May 2010 for boycotting national identification card registration for religious reasons. Most members subsequently agreed to register.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses' Office of General Counsel, local authorities detained and imprisoned 23 Jehovah's Witnesses for a period of two to 18 nights for failure to participate, due to religious beliefs, in armed night patrols throughout the reporting period. In 2005 the minister of local government issued a decree stating that Jehovah's Witnesses were not required to participate in night patrols. No new laws requiring Jehovah's Witnesses participation in night patrols have been promulgated since that ruling. The number of Jehovah's Witnesses arrested for failure to participate in night patrols increased from 17 to 23 detentions since the last reporting period.

On August 13, 2009, the Provincial High Court in Musanze summoned a 16-year-old Jehovah's Witness and charged him with disturbing the peace of the country because the previous year he refused to sing the national anthem at school. Police called his mother to the station and detained her for several days. The judge acquitted the youth in October 2009.

In August 2008 local authorities detained 70 Jehovah's Witnesses in Rwamagana and 150 in Kibungo for holding religious events, although the groups had notified local officials of their planned events. Officials released both groups the next morning without charge. There were no reports of detentions for holding authorized religious events during the reporting period.

In July 2008 police arrested briefly 112 residents, including children, in Rusizi District for holding night prayers in a private home. They were all released, and there were no reports that

© UNHCR authorities arrested individuals for holding night prayers in a private home during the reporting period.

During the reporting period, school officials expelled 12 Jehovah's Witnesses students for refusing to sing the national anthem. A total of 118 students have been expelled since 2008. Between April 2009 and June 2010, school officials readmitted 102 of the 118 expelled students.

In April 2008 school officials in certain districts fired 215 Jehovah's Witnesses teachers for not participating in government sponsored "solidarity training" (Itorero). As of June 2010, 119 remained unemployed, 48 had gone to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 47 found alternative employment, and one had returned to teaching.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Numerous associations and interfaith groups, such as the Ecumenical Council of Churches and the Protestant Council of Rwanda, contributed to understanding and tolerance among various religious groups. The Interfaith Commission for Rwanda supported programs aimed at reconciling genocide survivors, released genocide prisoners, and genocide detainees' families.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Embassy officers held meetings with members of the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, Baptist Association, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, leaders of the Muslim community, and evangelical Protestant groups to promote interfaith dialogue and discuss religious freedom.

In addition embassy officers met with local and international nongovernmental organizations involved in peace, justice, and reconciliation efforts that focused on religious tolerance and freedom, as well as with government officials to discuss religious issues.