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2010 Report on International Religious Freedom - Uganda

[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.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. The government continued to restrict religious groups it perceived as "cults."

There were few 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 93,000 square miles and a population of 32.7 million. According to official government figures, an estimated 85 percent of the population is Christian, 12 percent Muslim, and the remaining 3 percent follow indigenous beliefs, Hinduism, Baha'i Faith, and Judaism. Some Muslims and Christians believed that the Muslim community was larger than the government numbers reflected. Among Christians, 42 percent are Roman Catholic, 36 percent Anglican, and 7 percent evangelical, Pentecostal, and Orthodox Christian. The Muslim population is primarily Sunni. Indigenous religious groups practice in rural areas, occasionally blending their beliefs with or practicing them alongside Christianity or Islam. Indian nationals are the most significant non-African ethnic population; they are primarily Shi'a Muslim followers of the Aga Khan or practice Hinduism. The northern and West Nile regions are predominantly Catholic; Iganga District in the east has the highest percentage of Muslims. The rest of the country's population has a mixture of religious affiliations.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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

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

The law prohibits the creation of political parties based on religion or other similar divisions.

The government allowed religious groups to obtain legal entity status under the Trustees Incorporation Act. The Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, Anglican Church, and the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) registered under this provision; however, the evangelical and Pentecostal churches have opted to register with the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Nongovernmental Organizations (NGO) Board, which requires yearly registration renewal. The NGO registration process takes at least six weeks, and then one to two weeks for reregistrations. Most religious organizations were granted permits; however, the NGO board declined to register some religious groups for various reasons, including "cultism" and activities that the board saw as undermining government programs. Registration with the NGO board provided certification that allows churches to access donor funding.

As a result of previous "cult activity," the government requires Kanungu District officials to recommend to the NGO board local community churches applying to register for the first time before the board can approve their registrations.

In public schools religious instruction was optional, and the curriculum covered study of world religious beliefs rather than one particular faith. Private madrassahs and Christian schools offered religious instruction and were common in the country.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. The government restricted religious groups it perceived as "cults."

During the reporting period, local officials and some sectors of the community urged the government to enact laws imposing restrictions on evening congregations. However, there were no reports that officials imposed restrictions on such gatherings.

As in prior reporting periods, a government committee continued to monitor the activities of 20 groups it perceived as "cults," including the Serulanda Spiritual Foundation in Rakai District, the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Kanungu District, the Abengeri in Hoima District, the New Heaven Church in Gulu, the Rwengwara Healing Church of All Nations in Kabarole, and the the Enjiri groups in Mbale and Luwero districts. On March 10, 2010, the committee reported registration of all 20 "cults" under the NGO act but highlighted the inadequacy of NGO postregistration supervision and recommended closer monitoring of these groups to prevent death or ill treatment of their followers.

During the reporting period, the NGO board denied registration to the Lord's Chosen Charismatic Revival Ministries. The board explained that the group had commercial interests, which were in breach of the NGO act. On February 2, 2010, police in Mityana District closed the Miracle Healing Church over allegations that it was mistreating followers by starving them and not allowing the sick to receive medical treatment.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On May 10, 2010, 10 of 39 suspects arrested on April 25 for holding an illegal assembly in Luwero pled guilty in court to illegal assembly charges and were sentenced to community service. One was released on bail for health reasons, while the rest were remanded to custody until May 28.

On March 15, 2010, police in Gulu arrested Justine Alum, Florence Lapolo, Martime Opio, and Francis Opio, all members of the Lobo Manyen Ki Polo Manyen religious sect, perceived by the government as a cult, which campaigns against modern medicines and medical practices. During the arrest police rescued an 11-year-old girl suffering from

sickle-cell anemia who was being treated with herbal medicine. On March 16 the suspects were released on police bond; the investigation was still ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

On October 21, 2009, police in Hoima arrested Pastor Moses Massa, leader of the Abengeri sect, also perceived by the government as a cult, for sabotaging government social welfare programs after police determined that none of his nine children had received immunizations or attended school. There were no further reports of developments at the end of the reporting period.

On September 23, 2009, police in Luwero District arrested 14 members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church for holding an illegal assembly. A court found them guilty of illegal assembly and sentenced them to community service.

In 2008 police in Padar detained Severino Lukoya and three of his employees for two weeks for operating the unregistered New Malta Jerusalem Church. The government continued to decline registration to the church throughout the reporting period, citing national security concerns. Lukoya is the father of Alice Lakwena, the former leader of the now defunct Holy Spirit Movement, which had launched an armed rebellion against the government in the 1980s.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, but prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

On May 24, 2010, the country hosted an international religious conference in Kampala on religion, peace, and development. The objective of the conference was to promote religion as a way to resolve conflict in Africa.

In April 2010 the UMSC worked with the U.S.-based United Religions Initiative to launch several programs to promote nonviolence, interfaith peace building, and environmental awareness. On November 16, 2009, the UMSC organized an interfaith dialogue at Makerere University. During the reporting period, UMSC also organized grassroots interfaith working groups to promote religious tolerance in several districts including Mbarara Jinja, Mpigi, and Luwero.

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.
