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2012 International Religious Freedom Report - Zimbabwe

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. The government ended its support of the breakaway Anglican Church of the Province of Zimbabwe (CPZ) following a Supreme Court decision in favor of the Church of the Province of Central Africa (CPCA), the official regional body representing the worldwide Anglican Communion.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy engaged religious leaders and faith-based organizations in support of religious freedom in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

Preliminary findings from the 2012 national census estimate the population at 13 million, although it is likely lower because an estimated three to four million Zimbabweans currently live outside the country due to economic and political crises. According to the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), 84 percent of the population is Christian. The EFZ's 2004 census estimates the Christian population is 33 percent Catholic; 42 percent evangelical or Pentecostal; 17 percent Anglican, Methodist, or Presbyterian, and 8 percent apostolic. There are a significant number of independent Pentecostal and syncretic African churches.

The majority of the population also adheres to indigenous religions. Religious leaders reported a continued increase in observance of indigenous religious practices, often simultaneously with Christianity. Approximately 14 percent of the population adheres solely to indigenous religious beliefs.

Approximately 3 percent of the population is Muslim, primarily immigrants of Mozambican and Malawian descent. The Muslim population is concentrated in rural areas and in some high-density suburbs. Small numbers of Greek Orthodox, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Bahais make up less than 1 percent of the population.

Political elites tend to be members of established Christian mainstream or Pentecostal churches. Some apostolic groups, along with the CPZ, support the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and are especially prevalent in ZANU-PF political strongholds.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and most other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution protects the right of individuals to choose and change their religion as well as privately or publicly to manifest and propagate their religion through worship, teaching, practice, and observance.

The 2002 Public Order and Security Act (POSA) restricts freedom of assembly, expression, and association. While POSA exempts religious activities and events, the government categorized as political any public gathering, including religious gatherings, critical of ZANU-PF.

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 may apply for tax-exempt status and duty-free privileges with the customs department, which generally grants these requests.

The education ministry sets curricula for public primary and secondary schools. Many public primary schools require a religious education course focusing on Christian religious groups but covering other religious groups, emphasizing the need for religious tolerance. Religious education is generally optional in secondary schools. School assemblies and functions routinely opened and closed with Christian prayer. The government does not regulate religious education in private schools but approves employment of headmasters and teachers.

The government observes Easter and Christmas as national holidays.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom, but the government imposed restrictions that affected members of religious groups. Following a November court decision, there was modestly positive change in the status of the government's respect for religious freedom. There was a decrease in government monitoring or harassment of religious leaders, religiously-affiliated nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and their members who criticized the government.

The government continued to invoke POSA to prevent or disrupt public gatherings. Compared to previous years, it targeted the public events and prayer rallies of religious groups less often.

The police subjected the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance (ZCA) to increased scrutiny. In mid-November, police broke up a ZCA-sponsored peace meeting in Kezi, allegedly for not having proper clearance. Police demanded that ZCA leaders in Plumtree, Binga, and Nkayi seek permission for holding any meetings, despite POSA's exemption for religious activities.

Government security agents, ostensibly following a court ruling which was overturned in November, prevented CPCA members from worshipping and conducting services at CPCA properties and other venues in the Harare, Masvingo, and Manicaland dioceses.

In June police blocked CPCA members from attending annual commemorations at the Bernard Mizeki shrine in Marondera at the urging of CPZ founder and ex-communicated Anglican Archbishop Nolbert Kunonga.

In July police blocked efforts by CPCA leaders to hold annual commemorations at the Arthur Shearly Cripps memorial in Chivhu, citing Kunonga's intention to hold CPZ commemorations at the same time. In both cases, the CPCA had to cancel its annual religious festivals. In September, Kunonga supporters with local police backing twice invaded two CPCA-controlled churches in urban Chivhu.

Despite these incidents, the most notable improvement in the government's respect for religious freedom this year occurred through the closure of the long-running legal dispute between the CPCA and ex-communicated Archbishop Dr. Nolbert Kunonga and his CPZ. On November 19, the Supreme Court found in favor of CPCA after an almost six-year-long dispute over leadership and related ownership of CPCA's extensive properties. Although police and local officials had previously supported Kunonga's faction, police cooperated to carry out eviction orders against CPZ following the November 19 decision.

Most official state gatherings and functions included non-denominational Christian prayers.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, and practice, although tensions between indigenous religious groups and Christian churches on issues of polygamy, modern medicine, education, and political exclusion continued during the year.

Some Christian groups blamed indigenous religious groups, particularly the apostolic community in Marange, for increasing HIV/AIDS rates in the community by discouraging condom use and preventing HIV/AIDS education, as well as encouraging polygamy with young girls. Civil society groups and health NGOs reached out to the apostolic community in Marange and other areas on this issue to mitigate the concerns. Religious leaders from a wide spectrum of groups continued to discuss these matters productively in interfaith council meetings.

Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Salvation Army, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Seventh-day Adventist churches continued to build and operate primary and secondary schools. The United Methodist, Catholic, and Seventh-day Adventist churches all operated private universities. Christian schools, the majority of which were Catholic, constituted one-third of all schools. Islamic, Hindu, and Jewish groups operated primary and secondary schools in major urban areas such as Harare and Bulawayo. Many private religious schools were religiously diverse and welcomed students from different faiths.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials and with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom. The embassy maintained close contact with CPCA officials during the CPCA/Kunonga struggle.

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