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2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Rwanda

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of religion and worship. The law requires religious groups and faith-based organizations (FBOs) to obtain legal status before beginning operations. It requires new organizations to secure land and facilities adequate for their activities before obtaining legal status. It also calls for legal representatives of FBOs and preachers with supervisory responsibilities to hold academic degrees. During the year, approximately 6,500 churches, mosques, and other places of worship remained closed for being unable to meet health and safety standards or noise pollution ordinances introduced in 2018. Of the 8,760 places of worship closed in 2018, the government reported 2,231 were allowed to open as of the end of 2020, but there were no new openings reported in 2021. The government did not publish statistics on the total number of places of worship. Many organizations reported the infrastructure improvements required to meet the standards were prohibitively expensive for groups of modest means, especially for those groups whose finances were negatively impacted by the country's COVID-19-related economic downturn. Government officials stated the cost of required improvements was only a problem for small informal groups, stating most religious groups with significant membership were able to bring places of worship into compliance with government requirements. Jehovah's Witnesses, noting their religious beliefs precluded them from swearing certain oaths, reported some members still faced obstacles obtaining certain professional licenses without having to swear an oath and with seeking to be married in civil ceremonies that did not involve an oath, but they also reported that civil servants no longer had to swear an oath to obtain employment.

Religious leaders stated religious groups and associations contributed to greater understanding and tolerance by participating in interfaith meetings, organizing activities under the auspices of religious umbrella organizations or interfaith groups, and collaborating on public awareness campaigns and community development projects.

U.S. embassy representatives engaged the government to discuss the FBO law and its implementation, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Embassy representatives encouraged government officials to be transparent and practice flexibility in working with religious groups seeking to meet the law's requirements. Embassy representatives urged the government to ensure the law would not harm any party's freedom of religion. Embassy representatives consulted with religious groups and FBOs on continued challenges in meeting government requirements for reopening places of worship. Through virtual and in-person engagement, embassy leadership and representatives also discussed with religious organizations the impact of COVID-19 on their communities and emphasized the importance of interfaith dialogue and mutual support during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ambassador and embassy representatives partnered with religious organizations to sponsor food deliveries to needy community members in lieu of religious ceremonies, which were cancelled due to COVID-19 prevention measures.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12.9 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2012 census, the population is 44 percent Catholic; 38 percent Protestant, including Anglican, Pentecostal, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, and evangelical Christian churches; 12 percent Seventh-day Adventist; 2 percent Muslim; and 0.7 percent Jehovah's Witnesses. Several other small religious groups, together constituting less than 1 percent of the population, include animists, Baha'is, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and a small Jewish community consisting entirely of foreigners. Approximately 2.5 percent of the population holds no religious beliefs. The head office of the Rwanda Muslim Community (RMC) stated Muslims could constitute as much as 12 to 15 percent of the population. The majority of Muslims are Sunni, with a small number of Shia (200-300), according to the RMC. While generally there are no concentrations of religious groups in certain geographic areas, a significant number of Muslims live in the Nyamirambo neighborhood of Kigali.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, religion, worship, and public manifestation thereof even when the government declares a state of emergency. Exercising these rights may be subject to limitations to ensure respect for others’ rights and good morals, public order, and social welfare. The constitution bars political parties based on religious affiliation. The penal code stipulates religious discrimination is punishable by five to seven years in prison and fines of 100,000 to one million Rwandan francs (\$100-\$1,000).

Under the law determining the organization and functioning of FBOs, which include religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) associated with religious groups, any organization, umbrella organization, or ministry that intends to begin operations must obtain legal status from the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB). According to the law, a religious group or NGO must submit the following to obtain legal status: an application letter addressed to the RGB; notarized statutes governing its organization; the address of its head office and the names of its legal representative and deputy, their duties, full address, and criminal records; a document certifying the legal representative and deputy were appointed in accordance with its statutes; a brief notarized statement explaining its doctrine; a notarized declaration of the legal representatives of the organization of consent to the responsibilities assigned to them; notarized minutes of the group’s general assembly that established the organization, approved its statutes, and appointed members of its organs; a notarized document describing the organization’s annual action plan and source of funding; a document indicating the building or meeting space meets the requirements of the building code of the area of operation; a letter issued by district authorities agreeing to collaborate with the organization; a partnership document issued by an umbrella organization of the organization’s choosing; and proof of payment of a nonrefundable application fee. The law states the RGB must either issue a certificate of legal personality within 60 days of the date of receipt of the application or, in case of denial, send a written notice explaining the reasons for the denial within 30 days of the date of receipt of the application. Under the law, FBOs that already held legal personality as of September 10, 2018, when the current law was passed, were not required to reapply but had to harmonize their functioning and statutes with the current law and submit the revised statutes to the RGB within 12 months of the law’s enactment.

Under the law, if the RGB denies a group’s application for legal status, the group may reapply when the reason for denial no longer exists.

The law stipulates preachers with supervisory responsibilities must possess a degree in religious studies from an institution of higher learning or any other degree with a valid certificate in religious studies issued by a recognized institution. The law also requires a religious group or NGO’s legal representative hold a degree from an institution of higher learning. The law states persons required to hold an academic degree shall have five years from the date of the law’s enactment to comply with the requirement.

The law establishes fines of one million to two million francs (\$1,000-\$2,000) and imprisonment from one to two years for any individual who obstructs the practice of religious rituals. The law also prohibits public defamation of rituals, symbols, and “religious cult objects.” The penalty is imprisonment for a term of not less than 15 days but less than three months and/or a fine of 100,000 to 200,000 francs (\$100-\$200).

The law regulates public meetings and states any person who holds a meeting or demonstration in a public place without prior authorization is subject to eight days’ to six months’ imprisonment, a fine of 100,000 to one million francs (\$100-\$1,000), or both. Penalties increase if the illegal meeting or demonstration is found to have threatened security, public order, or health. The law states religious sermons must be delivered in designated facilities that meet the requirements of the law and if an FBO intends to organize a special public gathering, it must seek authorization from the competent authority.

Under the law, FBOs are prohibited from causing noise pollution. Offenders are subject to a fine of 100,000 to one million francs (\$100-\$1,000), and repeat offenders are subject to increased fines and up to one month’s imprisonment. By law, groups may not use their faith, religious practices, and preaching to jeopardize national unity, peace and security, public order and health, good morals, good conduct, freedom, or the fundamental rights of others.

Students in public primary school and the first three years of secondary education must take a survey class on world religions, ethics, and citizenship. The Ministry of Education establishes the curriculum. The law does not specify opt-out provisions or penalties for not taking part in the class. The law allows parents to enroll their children in private religious schools.

The government subsidizes some schools affiliated with religious groups. A presidential order guarantees students attending any government-subsidized school the right to worship according to their beliefs during the school day, as long as their religious groups are registered in the country and the students’ worship practices do not interfere with learning and teaching activities. The order does not stipulate any procedure for arranging special accommodations.

The law states FBOs may give their opinions on social or faith-related matters but may not engage in political activities to gain political power, organize debates to support political organizations or political candidates, or use any other means to support candidates for any public office.

Every foreign missionary must have a temporary resident permit and a foreign identity card. Specific requirements to obtain the permit (which is valid for two years and renewable) include a signed curriculum vitae, an original police clearance from the country of prior residence, an authorization letter from the parent organization, and a fee of 100,000 francs (\$100).

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

Government Practices

During the year, approximately three-fourths of the places of worship closed by the government in 2018 remained closed because they failed to make government-mandated infrastructure improvements to address health and safety standards or noise pollution ordinances. Government officials stated these requirements were necessary to protect the health of worshippers and said while some places of worship had been closed, religious organizations were not prohibited from operating. Of the 8,760 places of worship closed in 2018, the government reported 2,231 were allowed to reopen as of December 2020 after making required improvements. There were no reports of additional places of worship being allowed to reopen in 2021. Many groups whose places of worship were closed in 2018 reported they had since joined with other groups whose facilities met government requirements. The government did not publish statistics on the total number of places of worship.

Civil society and religious leaders assessed many places of worship would not reopen because the required improvements were prohibitively expensive for organizations of modest means, reporting the continued severe economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this difficulty. Government officials stated the cost of required improvements was only an issue for small informal groups, and most religious groups with significant membership were able to bring places of worship into compliance with government requirements. Government officials said standards for improvements were applied flexibly and took into account differences of urban and rural contexts. Some religious leaders stated the government’s standards were burdensome in that they were inconsistent with the overall level of development in some communities and were applied inflexibly across the country.

Media reported several cases in which local officials broke up groups that had gathered to worship in contravention of COVID-19-related government prohibitions on mass gatherings, including gatherings for religious purposes. This included several incidents of religious groups gathering in caves for prayer services, contrary to government COVID-19 preventive measures. These preventive measures (and restrictions on religious organizations’ activities) fluctuated throughout the year according to the public health conditions in the country. Government officials stated the government coordinated closely with religious leaders to develop guidelines on hand washing, physical distancing, and other safe practices that would allow for the resumption of services. Government and religious group representatives reported many groups resumed services in line with these guidelines. Religious groups reported they were not always consulted before the government made changes to its guidelines.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported it was difficult to obtain civil marriages without taking an oath on the Rwandan flag and said they were unable to receive some professional licenses requiring the same oath. For example, as of October, no Jehovah’s Witnesses were members of the Rwanda Bar Association for this reason. Jehovah’s Witnesses faced sporadic issues with respect to being asked to participate in military and patriotic activities and certain religious services at school in contravention of their beliefs. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 44 students remained unable to attend school since 2019 due to their refusal to participate in such activities. Government officials said they would investigate the matter, stating this inability of students to attend school contravened government policy. Aside from these problems, Jehovah’s Witnesses otherwise reported the government worked with them to provide reasonable accommodations as required, and they cited as an improvement the fact that civil servants no longer had to swear an oath in order to obtain employment.

Religious leaders said the government pressured prominent religious leaders to be “positive” personalities and refrain from making statements in conflict with government policies or the government’s narrative of the genocide in 1994.

Muslim community leaders stated they maintained a collaborative relationship with the Rwanda National Police to counter violent extremism related to religion. They emphasized their efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism after authorities foiled a terrorism plot in September in Kigali and arrested several suspects ostensibly linked to ISIS-Democratic Republic of the Congo. These efforts included youth and community outreach, cautioning community members about extremist recruitment efforts, countering violent extremism with messages of peace and inclusion, and urging cooperation with law enforcement.

There were reports the government monitored and interfered in the internal leadership affairs of some religious organizations and pressed them to make decisions in a manner inconsistent with organizations’ internal guidelines and governance procedures. There were also reports of independent religious groups facing difficulties establishing themselves. These groups reported many requirements for obtaining official registration – for example, purchasing property – were difficult to fulfill for groups that did not already have legal status. Observers stated these difficulties disproportionately affected organizations without well-developed internal governance structures, such as unaffiliated Protestant churches.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders said numerous religious groups and associations contributed to greater religious understanding and tolerance by participating in interfaith activities and collaborating on public awareness campaigns and community development projects. During the year, the Rwanda Interfaith Council, an organization comprising umbrella organizations representing all major faith communities, including Catholics, Anglicans, Muslims, and Protestants, convened interfaith communities and coordinated their cooperation with one another and with the government on topics such as COVID-19 vaccination campaigns.

Observers said religious organizations played a crucial role in meeting the humanitarian needs of poor and vulnerable citizens most affected by COVID-19.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives continued to engage with government officials and religious organizations on the FBO law and its implementation, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Embassy representatives encouraged government officials to be transparent and practice flexibility in working with religious groups seeking to meet the law’s requirements. Embassy representatives urged the government to ensure the law would not harm any party’s freedom of religion. Embassy representatives discussed the law with government officials and encouraged the government to maintain clear channels of communication with religious groups and FBOs. Embassy representatives urged the government to be flexible in the application of government regulations and to work with religious groups and FBOs to reopen places of worship. Embassy representatives noted the importance of ensuring the independence of religious organizations and raised concerns regarding reports of government officials interfering in those organizations’ leadership decisions.

Embassy representatives consulted with religious groups and FBOs (including Christians, Muslims, and Jehovah’s Witnesses) on continued difficulties in meeting government requirements for reopening places of worship. Religious groups reported the requirements led to a consolidation of smaller groups that were unable to meet government requirements due to lack of financial and administrative resources.

The embassy partnered with Christian NGOs and Muslim community leaders to distribute food donations to needy members of their religious communities at a time when in-person gatherings for religious holidays were not possible due to COVID-19 public health measures. The embassy hosted interfaith discussions focused on religious diversity and how faith groups could help their communities cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. In October, embassy leaders hosted an interfaith roundtable highlighting the benefits of interfaith cooperation.

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