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2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Zambia

Executive Summary

The constitution declares the country a Christian nation; the constitution also prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, belief, and religion. Prominent religious groups continued to state the government should not be involved in religious affairs, such as organizing national prayer days. On October 18, the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs (MNGRA) coordinated the fourth National Day of Prayer and Fasting. Various religious groups raised concerns over the government-managed event, stating it blurred the line between church and state. The government continued to introduce administrative measures to regulate religious affairs that religious groups said were excessively bureaucratic. New procedures included a requirement that clergy practicing in the country must have attended a “recognized and reputable” theology school, but the government provided no specific definition or list of acceptable schools. Religious groups must also belong to a larger religious grouping, locally known as a “mother body.” To accommodate this requirement, the MNGRA sought to recognize additional church mother bodies to encompass the variety of Christian and other religious groups. Some religious groups remained opposed to the process, as they felt that government was forcing them to align their faith to a particular mother body. Religious leaders stated the clearance procedures for foreign visitors coming to conduct religious activities remained arduous. They also criticized public statements by government officials that they said were detrimental to promoting religious tolerance. For example, in September Minister of National Guidance and Religious Affairs Godfridah Sumaili told the media that inviting Hindus and Muslims to join in the MNGRA-hosted National Day of Prayer event would cause “confusion.”

Incidents of mob attacks and killings of individuals suspected of practicing witchcraft continued throughout the country. Victims were often elderly persons reportedly associated with witchcraft. For example, in August a 59-year-old man from Copperbelt Province’s Masaiti District was killed by a mob on suspicion of practicing witchcraft. Leaders of religious organizations continued to hold regular meetings to promote mutual understanding of and joint advocacy on religious issues. Among these were joint approaches in favor of restricting government involvement in oversight of worship and religious practice.

U.S. embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, met with government officials to discuss topics related to religious freedom such as enforcement of registration laws and the regulation of new and existing religious groups. Embassy representatives also met with religious leaders to discuss issues of religious freedom, interfaith relations, and the role of religious groups in the national dialogue process designed to reduce tensions following the disputed results of the 2016 general election.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 16.5 million (July 2018 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates, 95.5 percent of the country is Christian; of these 75.3 percent identify as Protestant and 20.2 percent as Roman Catholic. Protestant groups with the largest numbers of adherents include the Anglican Church, evangelical Christians, and Pentecostal groups. Approximately 2.7 percent of the population is Muslim, with smaller numbers of Hindus, Baha'is, Buddhists, Jews, and Sikhs. Approximately 1.8 percent of the population adheres to other belief systems, including indigenous religions and witchcraft, or belongs to small communities that hold no religious beliefs. Many persons combine Christianity and indigenous beliefs.

Muslims, Sunni and Shia, are primarily concentrated in Lusaka, Eastern, and Copperbelt Provinces. Many are immigrants from South Asia, Somalia, and the Middle East who have acquired citizenship. A small minority of indigenous persons are also Muslim. Hindus, mostly of South Asian descent, are located largely in the Copperbelt and Lusaka and estimate the size of their community at approximately 10,000. There are small numbers of Jews, mostly in Lusaka and Northern Province.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares the country to be a Christian nation but upholds freedom of conscience, belief, and religion for all persons. It prohibits discrimination based on religion and provides for the right of individuals to manifest and propagate religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. It protects the freedom of individuals to change their religion or belief. It states no one shall be compelled to take an oath or perform acts contrary to his or her religious belief. The law prescribes legal recourse against, and penalties of fines and imprisonment for, violations of religious freedom.

The MNGRA has a mandate to provide oversight on all matters relating to national guidance and religious affairs in the country, according to a March publication of the ministry's strategic plan. Ministry functions include preserving religious heritage sites and coordinating public religious celebrations, such as the commemoration of the declaration as a Christian nation (December 29), the National Day of Prayer (October 18), and World Prayer Day (first Friday in March). The ministry's mandate also includes

ensuring Christian values are reflected in government, education, family, media, arts and entertainment, and business, as well as promoting church-state, interdenominational, and interfaith dialogue.

Under new regulations published in March, all religious organizations are required to register through the Chief Registrar's Office in the Ministry of Home Affairs. A group must have a unique name, recommendation letter from its mother body, and a document of the clergy's professional qualifications from a “recognized and reputable” theological school, but the government provides no specific definition or list of qualifying institutions. The Chief Registrar's Office then conducts a preliminary assessment of the applicant's authenticity and religious purpose as well as a security check. Religious groups must pay a one-time fee of 2,000 kwacha (\$170) and adhere to laws pertaining to labor, employment practices, and criminal conduct.

All religious groups are required to affiliate with an umbrella body, often referred to as a “mother body,” which gathers individual churches and denominations under one administrative authority. Key mother bodies include the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops, Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia, and Council of Churches in Zambia. During the year, the MNGRA expanded the number of umbrella bodies, an action it said was intended to allow more minority groups to join existing umbrella bodies or form their own. Additional bodies included the Independent Churches of Zambia, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Apostles Council of Churches, Islamic Supreme Council of Zambia, House of Rastafari, Jewish Board of Zambia, and Guru Nanak Council of Zambia.

All religious groups holding a public event outside of normal worship or prayer services are required to obtain prior clearance from the MNGRA. The religious group must prove membership in a mother body and submit a validation letter and documentation of its activities to the ministry. After granting approval, the ministry instructs law enforcement authorities under the Ministry of Home Affairs to allow the religious group to hold an event or activity.

The Minister of Home Affairs has the legal authority to revoke the registration of religious groups. Grounds for revocation include failure to pay registration fees or a finding by the minister that the group has professed purposes or has taken or intends to take actions that run counter to the interests of “peace, welfare, or good order.” Groups may appeal this finding in the courts. The government has the authority to levy fines and prison sentences of up to seven years against unregistered religious groups and their members; there were no reported cases involving prison sentences or fines levied during the year.

The MNGRA may make a recommendation to the tax authority for consideration of a tax exemption for a religious group. The recommendation is based on a group's long-term record and profile of community social work. The law provides for privileged tax treatment for public benefit organizations, including religious groups, provided they are established for the promotion of religion, education, and relief of poverty or other distress.

The constitution allows religious groups the right to establish and maintain private schools and provide religious instruction to members of their religious communities. The government requires religious instruction in all schools from grades one through nine. Students may request education in their religion and may opt out of religious instruction only if the school is not able to accommodate their request. Religious education after grade nine is optional and not offered at all schools. The religious curriculum focuses on Christian teachings but also incorporates comparative studies of Islam, Hinduism, and traditional beliefs.

The MNGRA must approve the entry into the country of foreign missionaries or clergy. The ministry, in collaboration with the Immigration Department, may approve or deny permits and visas for travelers coming into the country for religious activities.

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

Government Practices

Catholic and Protestant church mother bodies, along with leaders of numerous minority religious groups, continued to oppose the existence of the MNGRA and what they said was its unclear mandate, stating it was not the role of politicians to guide religious groups. There were no new legislative actions during the year that specified the ministry's role and responsibilities.

According to religious groups, administrative regulations and requirements continued to impede the process of obtaining a permit to hold a religious gathering. These requirements included obtaining a recommendation letter from the mother body and clearance from the MNGRA and Ministry of Home Affairs.

Minority religious groups with no representative mother body stated they continued to have difficulty complying with regulations instituted by the MNGRA requiring all religious groups to associate with a mother body. While minority groups generally welcomed the idea of having their own umbrella groups, some said they felt pressured to identify themselves with larger groups whose faith may not align well with theirs. The ministry held consultative meetings with a range of Christian and other minority religious groups on this issue during the year.

Other subjects discussed in the ministry's consultations with religious groups included the commemoration of the constitutional amendment establishing Zambia as a Christian nation, the National Day of Prayer, the ministry's strategic plan, and legislation to support ministry policies such as the self-regulatory framework.

For any foreign clergy entering the country, religious groups needed to provide proof of legal registration as a religious group, a recommendation letter from their aligned umbrella body, and clearance from clergy in the country of origin. This documentation was presented to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration Department, and the MNGRA. Religious leaders stated the clearance procedures remained laborious and bureaucratic and posed a challenge to some activities of the religious groups.

Religious leaders reported feeling pressure to minimize commentary on political topics or face discrimination from politicians with different views. Religious groups said some clergy members practiced self-censorship of comments on governance issues. According to religious leaders, clergy members who expressed dissenting views on governance or human rights faced the possibility of being labeled as “aligned” with the political opposition.

On October 18, the government sponsored and organized the fourth National Day of Prayer and Fasting under the theme “Facing the Future as a Reconciled, United, and Prosperous Nation under God’s Guidance.” Some churches and political opposition leaders did not take part in the event, which they stated was politically driven by the ruling party. The day was declared a national holiday, and businesses were encouraged to allow employees to attend prayer events. During the event, authorities banned liquor sales until 6 p.m.; sales are normally legal at 10 a.m. Some institutions, including government ministries, conducted roll calls of their employees at government-sponsored events, a practice criticized by opposition political parties and some civil servants.

Prominent religious groups continued to state the government should not be involved in religious affairs, such as organizing the national prayer days and building a proposed Interdenominational House of Prayer, which remained incomplete. The Council of Churches in Zambia, Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops, Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia, and other religious groups continued to state that building an Interdenominational House of Prayer should not be government driven.

In early November three key church mother bodies – the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops, Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia, and Council of Churches in Zambia – agreed to chair a national dialogue process, co-organized by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Zambia Centre for Interparty Dialogue (ZCID); the churches became involved due to their standing in society and the perception that they were nonpartisan actors. Sources stated that the process sought to reduce tensions that simmered since the contested 2016 elections and to prepare the country for peaceful national elections in 2021. Negotiations between the church mother bodies and ZCID on the structure and content of the dialogue process were ongoing at year’s end.

Some minority religious groups said that public statements by government officials during the year were detrimental to the promotion of religious tolerance. In September Minister of National Guidance and Religious Affairs Godfridah Sumaili declared that inviting Hindus and Muslims to join the MNGRA-hosted National Day of Prayer event would cause “confusion,” adding, “It’s an arrangement that we want to worship God in the way that we are accustomed to.” A Muslim group reported a significant decline in the number of non-Muslim participants in events commemorating Islamic holidays during the year, which they attributed to statements such as that made by Sumaili and other government leaders.

Religious groups noted groups – mainly “cadres” (groups of political supporters, often paid by a political party) – encroached on church-owned land. For instance, a religious group said that in February political supporters of the ruling party trespassed on

church-owned land in Chongwe District in an attempt to take ownership. According to the religious group reporting the incident, the cadres accused the group of practicing “Satanism” and incited the community to support the land encroachment. Law enforcement officials were investigating the matter at year’s end.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Incidents of mob violence against and killings of suspected practitioners of witchcraft continued, particularly against elderly citizens. In August police arrested a 22-year-old man in Central Province’s Serenje District for allegedly killing his 86-year-old grandfather, whom he suspected of practicing witchcraft. The court case continued at the end of the year. In the same month, a mob killed a 59-year-old man from Copperbelt Province’s Masaiti District on suspicion that he killed his daughter through witchcraft.

Leaders of religious organizations, including the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops, Council of Churches in Zambia, and Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia, continued to hold regular meetings to promote mutual understanding of and joint advocacy on religious issues. Among these were joint approaches in favor of restricting government oversight of worship and religious practice. The three mother church bodies also objected to the government sponsoring and organizing the National Day of Prayer.

Religious groups continued to sponsor social and economic programs. For example, the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops implemented a child protection policy that sought to make the church and society a safe place for children and vulnerable adults.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials, including the Ambassador, frequently met with government officials, including officials from the MNGRA, to discuss topics related to religious freedom, such as government-sponsored religious observances, interfaith relations, and the use of religion as a tool in the political arena.

Embassy officials met with Christian, Muslim, Baha’i, and other religious groups to discuss government regulations, religious tolerance, governance, human rights, and the national dialogue. The Ambassador engaged with the Catholic Archbishop of Lusaka and local religious leaders during travels throughout the country. In November the embassy hosted a panel discussion in commemoration of International Religious Freedom Day. Under the theme “Zambia’s Legacy of Religious Freedom,” the discussion focused on peaceful coexistence among various religious groups throughout the country’s history. The event brought together religious groups, scholars, NGOs, and government representatives. The embassy also used social media to engage with the public in promoting religious freedom and tolerance during the commemoration of International Religious Freedom Day.

ecoi.net summary:

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