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2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Burundi

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the state as secular, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for freedom of conscience and religion. It prohibits political parties from preaching religious violence or hate. Laws regulating nonprofit organizations and religious denominations require registration with the Ministry of the Interior, and religious denominations must meet standards including a minimum number of adherents in order to seek registration. Religious groups that do not seek or receive registration may face scrutiny, and at times harassment or prosecution, by government officials and ruling party members. On March 14, a man in Cankuzo Province died after being arrested and imprisoned for refusing to register as a voter due to his religious beliefs. The official cause of death was malaria, but witnesses cited beatings with iron rods and stated that they contributed to his death. Approximately 2,500 members of a nonrecognized religious group that fled the country to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2013 and 2014 returned to the country in April. The Ministry of Interior appointed 11 members of a new religious monitoring body, of whom eight were religious leaders, including the president and vice president of the committee. The committee included one Muslim representative, six representatives from Protestant denominations, and one Catholic representative, who resigned and was not replaced during the year. The committee reported extensive efforts to promote dialogue among and within religious denominations during the year. Among the committee's stated functions was to track what were termed subversive or inflammatory teachings of religious groups.

Religious leaders from different denominations sought to promote improved interfaith relations, which at times were strained by political differences, including through nongovernmental organization (NGO)-supported dialogue programs.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government and urged the government to respect the free exercise of religious conscience. The embassy encouraged societal leaders, including representatives of major faith groups, to support religious acceptance and promote interfaith discussion of the collaborative role religious groups could play in disseminating a message of peace and tolerance to the population. Embassy representatives met with the Ministry

of the Interior’s religious monitoring committee, stressing U.S. support for religious freedom and discussing the group’s work to promote dialogue within and among religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.8 million (July 2018 estimate). A 2010 report from Pew Religious Futures lists Christians as constituting 91.5 percent of the population, indigenous groups 5.7 percent, and Muslims, 2.8 percent. According to the 2008 national census, 62 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 21.6 Protestant, 2.5 Muslim, and 2.3 Seventh-day Adventist. Another 6.1 percent have no religious affiliation, and 3.7 percent belong to indigenous religious groups. The Muslim population lives mainly in urban areas, and the head of the Islamic Community of Burundi estimates Muslims constitute closer to 10-12 percent of the population. Most Muslims are Sunni. There are some Shia Muslims and a small Ismaili community. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah’s Witnesses, Orthodox Christians, The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, Hindus, and Jains. A 2013 national survey found that there are 557 religious groups in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution establishes a secular state; prohibits religious discrimination; recognizes freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; and provides for equal protection under the law regardless of religion. These rights may be limited by law in the general interest or to protect the rights of others, and may not be abused to compromise national unity, independence, peace, democracy, or the secular nature of the state, or to violate the constitution. The constitution prohibits political parties from preaching religious violence, exclusion, or hate.

The government recognizes and registers religious groups through the law covering nonprofit organizations, which states these organizations must register with the Ministry of Interior. There is a 20,000 Burundian franc (\$11) fee for registration. Each religious group must provide the denomination or affiliation of the institution, a copy of its bylaws, the address of its headquarters in the country, an address abroad if the local institution is part of a larger group, and the names and addresses of the association’s governing body and legal representative. Registration also entails identifying any property and bank accounts owned by the religious group. The ministry usually processes registration requests within two to four weeks. Leaders of religious groups who fail to comply or who practice in spite of denial of their registration are subject to six months’ to five years’ imprisonment.

The law regulating religious groups also incorporates specific requirements for religious denominations seeking registration. Any new religious congregation must have a minimum of 500 members if initiated by a citizen and 1,000 members if initiated by a foreigner. It prohibits membership in more than one religious group at the same time.

The law does not grant general tax exemptions or other benefits to religious groups, with certain exceptions. Some religious and nonreligious schools have agreements with the government entitling them to tax exemptions when investing in infrastructure or purchasing school equipment and educational materials.

The official curriculum includes religion and morality classes for all secondary and primary schools. The program offers religious instruction for Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam, although all classes may not be available if the number of students interested is insufficient in a particular school. Students are free to choose from one of these three religion classes or attend morality classes instead.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Human Rights Watch reported the March 14 death of Simon Bizimana following his arrest and alleged physical mistreatment during a month-long detention in prison in Cankuzo Province for refusing to register as a voter, which is not a crime under federal law, ahead of the country's May constitutional referendum. A video of a local official questioning Bizimana prior to his arrest, during which he stated he would not participate in elections due to reasons of religious conscience, circulated widely on social media. Bizimana was a member of a small Christian fellowship group. A hospital certificate stated the cause of death was malaria, but witness accounts alleged his condition had been worsened by beatings with iron rods inflicted by police.

The Ministry of the Interior sometimes denied requests for registration from religious groups but did not make information available on the applicants who were refused or the reasons for refusal. In May the minister of interior held a meeting with the leaders of religious groups to remind them that any group that did not comply with the law's provisions for registration could be subject to suspension.

In April approximately 2,500 followers of Eusebie Ngendakumana, aka Zebiya, returned to the country after seeking asylum first in the DRC and later in Rwanda. The members of the group departed the country in 2013 and 2014 following violent clashes with government security services and prosecutions of some members. Representatives of the group stated they had not sought accreditation as a religious denomination because they viewed themselves as members of the Catholic Church, leading to scrutiny from the government and the closure of the group's shrine in Kayanza Province. The group primarily took refuge in the DRC but traveled from the DRC to Rwanda in March after refusing to comply with the requirements of the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for biometric registration, which they stated they considered contrary to their beliefs. They similarly objected to registration requirements, vaccination requirements, and processed food rations in Rwanda, leading to the arrest of approximately 30

members and their subsequent decision to return to the country in April. Once back in the country, the government provided the group transportation to their home communes. There were subsequent reports that some members of the group faced scrutiny from government and ruling party officials. There were no reports of arrests or harassment as of the end of the year; a representative of the group stated that members had faced no significant harassment since their return, while articulating concern that the group continued to have no access to the Kayanza shrine. Ngendakumana reportedly remained in exile as of the end of the year.

President Pierre Nkurunziza routinely employed religious rhetoric in the context of political speeches and invoked divine guidance for political decisions. The government continued a campaign launched in 2017 promoting the “moralization of [Burundian] society.” The president conducted events in provinces around the country attended by invited groups including government officials, ruling party members, religious leaders, and other local notables. During the events, which were not recorded or open to media and during which participants were not allowed to take notes, he gave lengthy addresses highlighting a mix of religious, historical, and cultural themes. The president also continued efforts begun in 2017, and connected rhetorically to the “moralization” campaign and invoking religious appeals, to require unmarried cohabitating couples to formalize their relationships as marriages.

National Assembly President Pascal Nyabenda participated in a ceremony in September to welcome 60 Muslim pilgrims returning from Mecca. First Lady Denise Nkurunziza, herself pastor of a church, organized a workshop with religious leaders to increase their involvement in fighting against mother-to-child HIV transmission. In August she organized a Christian prayer crusade in Kayanza Province, which government officials, ruling party members, and religious leaders attended.

During the year, the Ministry of the Interior appointed 11 members of a new religious monitoring body, of whom eight were religious leaders, including the president and vice president of the committee. The committee included one Muslim representative, six representatives from Protestant denominations, and one Catholic representative, who resigned and was not replaced during the year. The ministry announced the establishment of the new religious monitoring body in 2017, stating its purpose was to “monitor, regulate, and settle” inter- and intradenominational disputes and to ensure that religious organizations operated according to law. The committee was also charged with tracking what were termed subversive or inflammatory teachings. The committee reported extensive efforts to promote dialogue among and within religious denominations during the year.

The government continued to grant benefits, such as tax waivers, to religious groups for the acquisition of materials to manage development projects. According to the Burundi Revenue Authority, the government also granted tax waivers to religious denominations for the import of religious materials such as printed materials, wines for masses, and equipment to produce communion wafers.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders from different denominations sought to promote improved interfaith relations, which at times were strained by political differences. During the year, religious leaders representing the Catholic Church, Protestant denominations, and the Islamic community participated in interfaith dialogue activities facilitated by local and international NGOs. For instance, in November the Catholic Church’s national training center hosted 47 religious leaders representing a broad range of confessional backgrounds to participate in a workshop aimed at reinforcing the capacity of religious groups to engage in conflict resolution and peaceful coexistence.

Civil society groups and media reported instances in which individuals and mobs threatened, attacked, and in some instances killed people accused of practicing witchcraft. Among other instances, on October 25, individuals set fire to the house of a man accused of practicing witchcraft in Cibitoke Province. In October a group of individuals in Bubanza Province complained of leaflets being distributed that accused them of witchcraft. A man in Ruyigi Province who had previously been accused of witchcraft was found decapitated on November 5. Such accusations were frequently tied to personal disputes or land conflicts, and sources stated that it did not appear that adherents to a specific religious faith were more likely to be targeted for allegations of witchcraft or that such accusations were tied to the religious practice of those targeted. Nor did there appear to be a correlation between individuals who attacked accused witchcraft practitioners and a religious group, according to observers.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government and urged the government to respect the free exercise of religious conscience. Embassy representatives met with the religious leaders who chaired the Ministry of the Interior’s religious monitoring committee, stressing U.S. support for religious freedom and discussing the group’s work to promote dialogue within and among religious groups.

The Ambassador and embassy officials continued to encourage and support broad-based religious acceptance and dialogue in meetings with religious leaders from different faiths and denominations and through engagement with civil society organizations supporting interfaith dialogue. The embassy encouraged societal leaders, including political leaders and representatives of major faith groups, to support religious acceptance and promote interfaith discussion of the collaborative role religious groups could play in disseminating a message of peace and tolerance to the population.

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