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Rwanda

International Religious Freedom Report

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, while the Government generally respects this right in practice, it fails to prevent local authorities from abusing or restricting religious freedoms.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report; however, there were multiple reports that local authorities have harassed and detained members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostal, and Catholic groups. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to have trouble in some provinces with their children being expelled from school. A number of religious leaders reported intimidation and harassment related to the presidential and legislative elections held in August 2003 and September 2003, respectively. Relations between the Government and the Catholic Church continued to improve.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 10,169 square miles, and its population is approximately 8.2 million. A 2001 study conducted by a foreign university reported that 49.6 percent of the population were Catholic, 43.9 percent Protestant, 4.6 percent Muslim, 1.7 claimed no religious beliefs, and 0.1 percent practiced traditional indigenous beliefs. This study indicated a 19.9 percent increase in the number of Protestants, a 7.6 percent drop in the number of Catholics, and a 3.5 percent increase in the number of Muslims from the U.N. Population Fund survey in 1996. The figures for Protestants include the growing number of members of Jehovah's Witnesses and evangelical Protestant groups. There also is a small population of Baha'is and Jews. There has been a proliferation of small, usually Christian-linked schismatic religious groups since the 1994 Genocide.

Foreign missionaries and church-linked nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of various faiths operate in the country, including Trocaire, Catholic Relief Services, Lutheran World Federation, World Vision, World Relief, Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Norwegian Church Aid, Salvation Army, Direct Aid (formerly the African Muslim Agency), Jesuit Relief Society, Christian Aid, Christian Direct Outreach, Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, African Evangelical Enterprise, and Jesus Alive Ministries. Foreign missionaries openly promote their religious beliefs, and the Government has welcomed their development assistance.

There is no indication that religious belief is linked directly to membership in any political party. The 2003 Constitution states that political organizations are prohibited from basing themselves on race, ethnic group, tribe, clan, region, sex, religion or any other division which may give rise to discrimination. Of the eight parties, the only one with a religious component to its name modified its title from the Democratic Islamic Party (PDI) to the Ideal Democratic Party, to comply with the Constitution. However, the party has always claimed to have non-Muslim members.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, while the Government generally respects this right in practice, it fails to prevent local authorities from abusing or restricting religious freedoms. There is no state religion.

The law provides for small fines and imprisonment of up to 6 months for anyone who interferes with a religious ceremony or with a minister in the exercise of his or her professional duties. The law regulates public meetings and calls for fines or imprisonment for those who violate these regulations.

Since the Government promulgated a law in 2001 giving it more influence over NGOs as well as religious institutions and organizations, the Ministry of Justice has registered 111 new religious groups, including 29 during the period covered by this report. The Ministry did not deny any new applications. However, the Government continued the previous year's suspension of two "radical" splinter organizations, both of which attempted to register as the primary group of their particular religion. Generally, however, no group's religious activities were curtailed as a result of difficulties or delays in the registration process.

There were reports that numerous religious organizations operated without legal recognition because the process is arduous, which government officials confirmed.

The Government permits religious instruction in public schools. In some cases, students are given a choice between instruction in "religion" or "morals." In the past, missionaries established schools that were operated by the government. In those schools, religious instruction tends to reflect the denomination of the founders, either Catholic or Protestant. Muslim private schools operate as well.

The Government observes five religious holidays as official holidays: Christmas, Easter, Eid-al-Fitr, All Saints' Day, and Assumption.

The Government has not actively supported religious forums aimed at increasing interfaith understanding and support, although several government leaders have participated in conferences organized by individual religious groups. In May, President Paul Kagame addressed a conference held in Kigali for Muslim leaders from 22 countries, in conjunction with Rwanda's Muslim Council. In April, Prime Minister Bernard Makuza held talks with the visiting heads of the World Council of Churches during the African Conference of Churches. Relations between the Government and the Catholic Church continued to improve because of collaboration and dialogue in the areas of education and reconciliation. In addition, in March, the Government participated in a conference with the Catholic Church on the 1994 Genocide.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In the past, the government forbade religious meetings at night on the grounds that insurgents formerly used the guise of nighttime "religious meetings" to assemble their supporters before attacking nearby targets; however, during the period covered by this report, the Government allowed such meetings if religious groups provided advance notification. Religious leaders reportedly cooperated with the government in limiting nighttime religious meetings and did not view the restriction as an infringement on their religious freedom. The government continued to require religious groups to hold services at their established places of worship and to ban the use of private homes for this purpose. Some small religious groups that met in private homes were forced to move to new locations.

On June 30, the Parliament voted to accept recommendations made by an Ad Hoc Commission on Genocide Ideology; the commission was critical of a number of churches, their activities, and leaders. The commission's report specifically targeted Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, a number of Pentecostal churches, and several Catholic priests. One example of criticism was of a Catholic priest accused of promoting genocide ideology because he associated with micro-credit borrowers, whose members were all of the same ethnic group. Another example consisted of several churches being accused of inciting their members to support government policies such as gacaca (a community-based model of conflict resolution) and night patrols. In addition, churches were criticized for allowing Hutu and Tutsi to

sit separately during prayers. The Commission recommended that the Government should intervene in internal church politics to resolve leadership conflicts, that an association called ABAHAMYA B'IZUKA (operating in Gisenyi Province) should be abolished, and that the Government should counsel churches about which activities were acceptable. It also called on the Parliament to adopt a special law to govern the functioning of all churches in the country.

The law does not require a person who wants to get married at a ceremony presided over by a government official to put his or her hand on the national flag, but this practice is enforced throughout the country. Jehovah's Witnesses have a very difficult time finding places to marry without this patriotic ceremony, to which they object on religious grounds. Jehovah's Witnesses claim that members of their faith have been beaten and imprisoned where the marriage certificates are issued due to their refusal to place their hands on the flag.

According to church officials, in 4 of the country's 12 provinces, 43 children of Jehovah's Witnesses were expelled from secondary schools between April and June for refusing to salute the national flag or to sing the national anthem. Church officials have raised the issue with national authorities, but most of the children remained expelled at the end of the period covered by this report. In addition, local authorities in Kibungo, Ruhengeri, Gitarama, and Butare Provinces supported such expulsions. However, three children expelled from schools in Karubanda and three expelled in Nyundo, both in Butare Province, returned to school.

In February 2002, government authorities forbade Pasteur Bizimungu, a former president of the country who organized a political party banned by the Government in 2001, from attending public church services; authorities charged that Bizimungu's presence would be "divisive". The Government's action reportedly was politically motivated. In April 2002, Pasteur Bizimungu was arrested on charges of illegal political activity. He was later charged with threatening state security and with financial improprieties. The trial against him began March 31, 2004, and he was found guilty and sentenced to 15 years in prison on June 7. On June 14, he filed for an appeal.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were numerous reports of members of Jehovah's Witnesses being detained or arrested for refusing to participate in night security patrols. Since March, a total of 209 Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned or detained on alleged security grounds, 34 of whom faced severe beatings while in detention. Detentions ranged from 1 day to 1 month in length, and although only eight individuals remained in detention at the end of the period covered by this report, the Government continued to make new arrests. Jehovah's Witnesses members from 6 of the 12 provinces were arrested on charges of "disobeying government emergency security policy," specifically, refusing to participate in night patrols. In four of the six provinces, local authorities reportedly beat the detained Jehovah's Witnesses. These include 8 that were arrested in Gikongoro Province on March 11; 3 that were arrested on March 25, and another 17 on May 17, in Gitarama Province; 5 arrested on April 29 in Ruhengeri Province; and 4 that were arrested in Gisenyi Province.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses' circuit overseers (church leaders) who travel to various congregations for ministerial activity were arrested. Police arrested Tharcisse Muhire on April 6, in Gitarama Province, on charges of "inciting school children to disrespect national symbols, and to oppose government policy on security." He reportedly was threatened and forced to walk for 4 hours under armed guard to the military prison in Nyabikenke; he was released in May. The other circuit overseer was arrested on June 20 and released the next day after a Jehovah's Witness delegation met with the authorities.

On May 3, soldiers detained a member of Jehovah's Witnesses and accused him of being a part of the Interahamwe political movement. The soldiers imprisoned him and reportedly forced 9 other prisoners to hit him a total of 117 times, after which he was released.

Local authorities in Umutara Province closed a Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall in late April. On May 2, an armed major in the Rwandan Defense Forces dispersed worshippers at a Kingdom Hall in Ruhengeri Province, claiming that the worshippers were guilty of "divisionism," or trying to undermine the security of the state. Local authorities told church officials they were responding to reports they heard on state-run Radio Rwanda that accused Jehovah's Witnesses of trying to undermine the security of the state. Articles making similar accusations appeared in

the state-run newspaper, Imvaho.

There were reports of intimidation of church leaders prior to and during the national presidential and legislative elections, held respectively in August and September 2003. Radio Rwanda, publicly denounced churches whose members abstained from voting. According to religious officials, Protestant church leaders were pressured into allowing members of the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) to campaign during church services. Members of a number of religious organizations reported that government agents pressured them into donating church resources, either money or vehicles, to support RPF campaign activities.

On January 11, Pentecostal Pastor Majyambere was arrested in Kigali on charges of "preaching rebellion." He remained in detention at the end of the period covered by this report.

In January, in Gisenyi Province, the police detained of 300 Christians, who belonged to the Institute of Saint Fidele. The Christians were accused of "destabilizing public order." Both groups were put through a 1-day education program and released.

On February 15, police arrested eight members of a dissident Catholic congregation in Gisenyi Province. The eight were conducting daily evening prayer meetings on behalf of a sick member of the congregation. They were accused of being involved in "subversive activities" and remained in detention at the end of the period covered by this report.

In March 2003, members of a Pentecostal church were arrested during a prayer service on Mt. Kigali for meeting at night and for practicing their religion outside of their church (both considered to be threats to security). The group had gone into a cave to pray when local security forces arrested them. At the end of the period covered by this report, the leaders of the group were still in detention. Church leaders believe it is a question of mental health and not subversive aims, and that detention is a good alternative to struggling in a society with extremely limited mental health resources.

According to several human rights groups, including Amnesty International and two local organizations, in November 2002, individuals who had split from a Pentecostal church and formed a new congregation were attacked outside their new place of worship in the Gikondo district of Kigali. Local Defense Forces, the mayor of the sector, and civilians reportedly participated in the attack; no one has been held accountable. Intimidation continued through February 2003, culminating in the arrests of the leaders of the church. They remained in detention at the end of the period covered by this report.

In March 2002, the Government arrested Laurent Kalibushi, a dissident Catholic priest, and several members of his prayer group who were holding meetings late at night in a private home in Kigali. Authorities charged that the prayer group, the Mouvement Sacerdotal Marial, was an "unhealthy and anti-social cult" with ties to the 2000 "doomsday cult" deaths in Uganda. Some observers believed that the arrests were a result of the group's ties to the banned political party of former president Bizimungu. All who were detained were released on April 5.

Some religious leaders were perpetrators of violence and discrimination, and several members of the clergy of various faiths have faced charges of genocide in the courts, in the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Arusha, Tanzania, and in foreign courts, notably in Belgium. In February 2003, the ICTR concluded the trials of Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, and his son, Gerald Ntakirutimana. Both were found guilty of genocide, and both cases are under appeal. Of the 31 detainees awaiting trial at the ICTR, 3 were religious leaders during the 1994 Genocide: Hormisdas Nsengimana, Rector of Christ-Roi College; Emmanuel Rukundo, a military chaplain; and Athanase Seromba, a Catholic priest.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Disputes between religious groups are rare; there are numerous associations and interfaith groups that contribute to understanding between the various religions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy officials maintain regular contact with leaders and members of the religious communities in the country.

The U.S. Government has funded a number of programs that promote religious freedom and interfaith understanding. Working with the Mufti of the country, the Embassy presented books and computers to an Islamic school in Kigali in May. The Embassy sponsored an interfaith commemoration event of September 11, at which a number of religious leaders spoke, both Christian and Muslim. The U.S. Agency for International Development works with several faith-based organizations on health and agricultural initiatives.

Embassy officers held numerous meetings with members of the Catholic and Anglican Churches, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, leaders of the Muslim community, and small, evangelical Protestant groups to promote interfaith dialogue and discuss religious freedom. In addition, Embassy officers regularly met with local and international NGOs involved in peace, justice, and reconciliation efforts that focus on religious tolerance and freedom.

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