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2013 International Religious Freedom Report - Rwanda

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. Once registered, most groups could practice their religion without government interference, and the government granted recognition to several additional religious groups during the year. The government, however, continued to take actions against Jehovah's Witnesses, intervened in the internal operations of at least one religious organization, and discouraged religious groups from dissenting from national policies and programs.

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

U.S. embassy representatives engaged with government officials and religious leaders on issues related to religious freedom and tolerance, particularly with respect to accommodation of religious practices as they relate to the country's laws and social norms. Embassy officials also stressed interfaith tolerance in outreach with religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the U.S. government, the population is 56.5 percent Roman Catholic, 11.1 percent Seventh-day Adventist, 26 percent other Protestant denominations, 4.6 percent Muslim, and 1.7 percent no religious beliefs. There are approximately 36,000 Jehovah's Witnesses, and several small religious groups constitute less than 1 percent of the population, including animists, Bahais, and a very small Jewish community consisting entirely of foreigners.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The constitution protects the rights of individuals to choose or change their religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion, which under the penal code is punishable by five to seven years in prison and fines of 100,000 to one million Rwandan francs (\$150 to \$1,502). Government policy allows individuals to express religious identity through headaddress in official photos for passports, driver's licenses, or other official documents.

The government grants legal recognition only to civil marriages. Government officials presiding over wedding ceremonies generally require couples to take a pledge "in the name of God Almighty" while touching the national flag, a government policy but not a legal requirement.

New public servants are required to take an oath of loyalty "in the name of God almighty." Touching the flag while reciting the oath is traditional but not mandated by law.

The law establishes fines of 20,000 to one million Rwandan francs (\$30 to \$1,502) and imprisonment from eight days to five years for anyone who hinders the free practice of religion; publicly humiliates rites, symbols, or objects of religion; or insults, threatens, or physically assaults a religious leader.

Under the law governing religious groups, all groups "whose members share the same beliefs, cult, and practice" must register with the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) to acquire legal status. The law covers religious groups, but not nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) associated with religious groups. Domestic NGOs associated with religious groups are also required to register with the RGB, but under a different law governing NGOs. The law imposes, and government policy exacerbates, burdensome registration requirements, as well as time-consuming requirements for annual financial and activity reports and action plans.

Unregistered religious groups may congregate after informing local authorities and may be granted a temporary registration certificate while the legal application process is ongoing. Unregistered religious groups may not proselytize, are subject to different visa requirements, and receive a significant degree of government scrutiny until they register as religious-based organizations under the law.

The law regulates public meetings and establishes fines of 100,000 to five million Rwandan francs (\$150 to \$7,511) and imprisonment of eight days to three years for unauthorized public meetings, including assemblies for religious reasons. Competent authorities are required to respond within 15 days to requests by religious-based organizations to hold special meetings in public.

For night meetings, including religious meetings, local authorities often require advance notification, particularly for ceremonies involving amplified music and boisterous celebrations.

Every foreign missionary must have a temporary resident permit and a foreign identity card. Specific requirements to obtain the permit (valid for two years and renewable) include a signed curriculum vitae, an original police clearance from the country of residence, an authorization letter from the parent organization, and a fee of 100,000 Rwandan francs (\$150).

All students in public primary school and the first three years of secondary education must take a religion class that covers various religions. The law includes neither opt-out provisions nor penalties for not taking part in the class. The law allows parents to enroll their children in private religious schools.

The constitution prohibits the formation of political organizations based on religion. The religious-based organizations law prohibits religious groups from engaging in activities to achieve political power, defined as supporting political organizations or candidates for public office.

Government Practices

The government imposed restrictions that affected members of smaller religious groups, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses.

Local officials occasionally retaliated against Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to sing the national anthem in school or to participate in community night patrols and government-sponsored "solidarity" civil and military training. There were two cases of Jehovah's Witnesses arrested for refusing on religious grounds to participate in community night patrols requiring carrying batons. Police held the detainees for periods ranging from three to four days before releasing them without charge.

In 2011, a public school headmaster in Rulindo District expelled four Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing to sing the national anthem. The students enrolled in different schools, but filed a criminal discrimination lawsuit against their

former headmaster. The court dismissed the cases in September because they were able to attend private schools. One child who was unable to afford private school attended no school for an entire school year, however. In Zaza in Eastern Province, six children were suspended from school between February 18 and April 20 for refusing to sing the national anthem on religious grounds. The school reinstated them after the threat of legal action against the school.

There were reports that government continued to interfere with the internal operations of religious organizations. The Pentecostal Church of Rwanda's (ADEPR) new executive committee took office in November after a lengthy government intervention in the church's leadership selection. In 2012, the government, through the RGB and the Ministry of Local Government, became involved in the ADEPR's operations after the RGB received complaints about internal divisions.

Of the 13 individuals who had filed lawsuits out of 21 Jehovah's Witnesses whom six government agencies had dismissed in 2011 for refusing to touch the national flag while taking the public servant's oath, six plaintiffs were still awaiting court dates in Kigali's High Court and seven cases were appealed to the Supreme Court. The remaining eight Jehovah's Witnesses had appealed their cases through administrative proceedings, but did not receive satisfactory resolutions to their cases and were preparing to file lawsuits in court. The plaintiffs claimed violations of their religious beliefs and illegal dismissal. At year's end none of those dismissed had regained their positions or received compensation from the government.

The government's policy that couples take an oath while touching the national flag made it difficult for Jehovah's Witnesses to marry legally, since few officials were willing to perform the ceremony without the flag oath and Jehovah's Witnesses objected to the practice on religious grounds. For some Jehovah's Witnesses, placing their hands on a Bible on top of the flag was an acceptable alternative.

In contrast to the period 2008-12, when there was a moratorium on registration of religious groups before and after the parliament deliberated on a new religious groups law, the government granted official recognition to some religious groups during the year, including to the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Unlike in previous years, Seventh-day Adventists did not report any incidents at public or private schools whereby students received failing marks for missing exams scheduled on their Sabbath. Nevertheless, Seventh-day Adventists continued to build their own schools at all levels across the country to avoid a recurrence of this problem.

Numerous associations and interfaith groups contributed to greater understanding and tolerance among religious groups by participating in interfaith meetings and collaborating on community development projects, such as providing assistance to HIV/AIDS patients and supporting government initiatives. The Interfaith Commission for Rwanda supported programs aimed at reconciling genocide survivors, released prisoners who participated in the genocide, and families of detained genocide participants.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy representatives regularly engaged with government officials and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy sponsored events with religious groups, including an iftar emphasizing religious tolerance with the Association of Muslims in Rwanda. The event brought together imams from several mosques, both inside and outside Kigali, as well as underprivileged youth. The embassy also conducted public outreach on religious freedom issues with various religious groups, such as an interview on a Christian radio station to discuss speech, religious tolerance, and diversity for the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.