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2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uganda

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and stipulates there shall be no state religion. It provides for freedom of belief, the right to practice and promote any religion, and the right to belong to and participate in the practices of any religious organization in a manner consistent with the constitution. The government requires religious groups to register. Muslim advocacy groups petitioned the Uganda Human Rights Commission to investigate allegations of extrajudicial killings by security agencies of 12 Muslim terror suspects, including one cleric. The Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) and Muslim civil society organizations also called upon authorities to try Muslim suspects via a fair and speedy process, noting that the government's failure to convict Muslims arrested for murder or on terror-related charges created the impression that it was biased and discriminated against the Muslim community. According to international media, in August, the government suspended 54 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including faith-based aid groups, for failing to meet registration requirements. According to media, members of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party accused some Roman Catholic priests of indirectly telling their congregations to vote for the opposition National Unity Platform party. Party members also accused some Anglican Church clerics of using their sermons to campaign for the NRM. Both Churches denied the allegations. Although the government consulted with the umbrella religious body, the Inter Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU), before suspending religious ceremonies in efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19, two religious leaders sued the government for this action, saying it infringed on their religious freedom. The Seventh-day Adventist Church of Uganda petitioned Prime Minister Robinah Nabbanja concerning a reported plan by the Ministry of Education and Sports to start lessons on Saturdays (the Adventist Sabbath) to make up for lost time as a result of long-term school closures due to COVID-19 countermeasures. The UMSC stated that despite an increase in the number of Muslims represented in the cabinet, the government used the 2014 census, which classified Muslims as a smaller minority than believed by the council, as a justification for discrimination. According to the UMSC, this enabled the government to discriminate against Muslims in providing social programs and hiring for government positions.

In October, UMSC representatives reported that some elite Christian high schools limited the number of qualifying Muslim students accepted for admission, in contravention of laws against religious discrimination, admitting as few as five Muslim students out of more than 100 applicants. The Uganda Muslim Youth Development Forum (UMYDF) reported that some Muslims experienced discrimination in employment, and it cited a case in which a telecom company dismissed a staffer after she ignored instructions not to wear a veil at work. Numerous social media users used their accounts to accuse religious leaders of rival faiths as "false prophets" and their followers as "lacking brains." In the period preceding the January 14 general elections, the IRCU reached out to local government leaders, media, and civil society to encourage tolerance and nonviolence.

U.S. embassy representatives regularly discussed religious freedom issues with government officials. The Ambassador met on several occasions with President Yoweri Museveni and emphasized the government's obligations to respect the rights of all persons, regardless of religious affiliation. At the start of Ramadan on April 13, the Ambassador used the embassy's social media platforms – amplified by the Uganda Radio Network – to promote religious tolerance, charity, and unity. Embassy representatives engaged local government officials in the eastern part of the country to promote religious tolerance. On May 6, the Ambassador met with the UMSC and the Kibuli Order of the Supreme Mufti (both Sunni umbrella organizations). Embassy representatives met with Nadwa (a coalition of Muslim scholars), the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church of Uganda, and the Tabliq Sunni community to promote religious tolerance, education, and peacebuilding in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 44.7 million (midyear 2021). According to the most recent census, conducted in 2014, 82 percent of the population is Christian. The largest Christian group is Roman Catholic at 39 percent; 32 percent of the population is Anglican, and 11 percent is Pentecostal Christian. The census reports Muslims constitute 14 percent of the population. The UMSC states that Muslims (primarily Sunni) are closer to 35 percent of the population. There is also a small number of Shia Muslims, mostly in Kampala and the eastern part of the country, particularly in the Mayuge and Bugiri Districts. Other religious groups, which collectively constitute less than 5 percent of the population, include Seventh-day Adventists, adherents of indigenous beliefs, Baptists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Orthodox Christians, Hindus, Jews, Baha'is, and those with no religious affiliation.

According to the Indian Association in Uganda, the largest non-African ethnic population is of Indian origin or descent, most of whom are Hindu. The Jewish community of approximately 2,000 members is mainly concentrated in Mbale Town, in the eastern region of the country. Generally, religious groups are dispersed evenly across the country, although there are large concentrations of Muslims in the eastern and northwestern parts of the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and establishes there shall be no state religion. It provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the right to practice and promote any religion, as well as to belong to and participate in the practices of any religious body or organization in a manner consistent with the constitution. The constitution also stipulates the government may limit these rights by measures that are "reasonably justifiable for dealing with a state of emergency." The constitution prohibits the creation of political parties based on religion.

The penal code criminalizes "disturbance of religious gatherings" and "wounding religious feelings."

The country's coat of arms bears the motto "For God and My Country." The law prohibits secular broadcasters from stating opinions on religious doctrine or faith. The law also prohibits radio and television stations from broadcasting advertisements that "promote psychic practices or practices related to the occult," material that encourages persons to change their faith, and content that uses or contains blasphemy, which is not defined by law. The government, however, seldom enforces these provisions of the law.

The government requires religious groups to register to obtain legal entity status. The government also requires religious groups to register with the Uganda Registration Services Bureau and then to secure a five-year operating license from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The bureau requires faith-based organizations to provide a copy of a land title or proof of ownership of premises; a copy of the board resolution to start a faith-based organization; a copy of the memorandum and articles of association spelling out what the organization intends to do; allotment of shareholding; and copies of the national identity cards of the directors. The government does not require the larger and more historically established religious groups – including Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Seventh-day Adventist groups and the UMSC – to obtain operating licenses.

The law exempts registered religious groups and their nonprofit activities from direct taxation.

Religious instruction in public schools is optional at the postprimary level. Primary schools must teach either Christianity, Islam, or both in their social studies classes. Many schools teach both and allow students to select which to attend. Secondary schools may choose which, if any, religious studies to incorporate into their curricula, and students who choose to attend that school must take the course offered. Primary school students may choose to answer questions about either Islam or Christianity during the religion portion of the national social studies exams. The state has separate curricula for world religions, including Christianity and Islam, and all schools must adhere to the state-approved curriculum for each religion they choose to teach. The majority of students in the country attend schools run by religious organizations.

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

Government Practices

The Muslim community accused security officials of extrajudicial killings of some Muslims and Muslim clerics suspected of involvement in radicalism and terrorism. On November 26, Muslim advocacy groups petitioned the Uganda Human Rights Commission "to open and conduct investigations, hear, make orders, and issue a report about the alleged extrajudicial killings by security agencies" of 12 Muslim terror suspects, including one cleric. In a televised address on November 20 following two suicide bombings in Kampala on November 16, President Museveni

announced that officers from the military intelligence and crime intelligence units had killed 12 terror suspects as they tried to resist arrest. Muslim advocacy groups, however, reported that security agencies had already subdued the suspects before shooting them. On November 28, the patron of the Kibuli Muslim community, Prince Kassim Nakibinge, called upon the security agencies to avoid profiling Muslims when investigating terrorism cases and called upon them to prosecute all suspects in courts of law. The UMSC and Muslim civil society organizations also called upon authorities to lawfully provide fair and speedy trials for Muslims, stating the government's failure to successfully prosecute Muslims it arrested for murder or terror-related charges and held for long periods of pretrial detention created the impression that it was biased and discriminated against the Muslim community.

Some Muslims complained that security agencies unfairly singled out Muslims while enforcing security and antiterrorism measures. On November 30, a police officer at Kyambogo University in Kampala stripped a female Muslim student of her veil before she could enter a room to take her exams. Police and the university issued apologies and promised to reprimand the officer in question.

On August 20, the government suspended 54 NGOs, including some faith-based aid groups, for failure to comply with registration requirements. The suspended organizations included the Islamic Da-awah and Orphanage Foundation, the St. Francis Foundation for the Poor, Jesus Shines Youth Ministries International, and Rays of Hope for Uganda. Pastor Michael Kyazze, the founder of Omega Healing Center in Kampala, stated, "The registration process requires NGOs to go through security agencies, such as the Internal Security Organization, to vet them."

Members of the ruling NRM party accused some Roman Catholic priests serving in remote parishes in the central region of subtly telling their congregations to vote for the main opposition candidate in the January 14 general elections. Some members of the opposition's National Unity Platform and Forum for Democratic Change parties also accused some Anglican Church of Uganda and evangelical clerics in the north of the country and in Kampala of using their sermons to campaign for the NRM. The churches and clerics denied the allegations. Observers noted that each of the major political parties accused at least one religious group of supporting its opponent.

On June 6, the government suspended all public gatherings until September 22 as part of its countermeasures to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Some religious leaders said the government's actions infringed on their religious freedom. On August 4, evangelical Protestant minister Wisdom Peter Katumba and Muslim cleric Imam Muhammed Bbale filed a suit in the High Court against the government, seeking to declare the suspensions illegal, since some commercial enterprises remained open; the UMSC was not a party to the suit. The petitioners' suit argued that the suspensions were "unjust, arbitrary, disproportionate, discriminatory, unjustifiable, and constitute a violation of the applicants' rights to practice, manifest, enjoy, profess, maintain and promote their religion." The High Court had not ruled on the suit by year's end. In October, UMSC representatives reported that prior to the suspensions, the government consulted the IRCU. Based on the consultations and after witnessing COVID-19-related deaths of many religious followers, the UMSC stated it agreed with the government's measures to curb COVID-19 and said the government implemented the suspensions equitably, without prejudice against religious groups.

On September 26, the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Uganda complained to Prime Minister Nabbanja regarding a plan that it said the Ministry of Education and Sports had proposed requiring students to attend classes on Saturdays (Adventist Sabbath), to replace instruction time lost to COVID-19-related school closures. The Church said the proposal "directly violated freedom of worship and freedom of conscience and the rights to education for the Adventist citizens." According to local media, the Prime Minister in a meeting told the Adventist Church to ignore the Ministry of Education and Sports' proposal because the cabinet had not yet approved it. During the meeting, the Church also petitioned the Prime Minister to halt the practice of public universities scheduling examinations on Saturdays.

In October, UMSC representatives reported that although President Museveni increased the number of Muslims in the cabinet from four to six 81 ministerial or junior ministerial positions, the government continued to use census figures that they said undercounted Muslims as a justification for underrepresentation of Muslims in government employment and limited access to government-facilitated social programs. In a December 31 address, President Museveni refuted criticisms that his government discriminated against Muslims, although he acknowledged a delay in the operationalization of Islamic banking. He noted that his government was providing interest-free start-up capital to Ugandans, including Muslims, as well as free vocational programs and agricultural subsidies.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In October, UMSC representatives reported that some elite Christian high schools limited the number of qualified Muslim students for admission, often admitting as few as five out of more than 100 applicants.

The UMYDF reported that some Muslims experienced discrimination in employment. According to the UMYDF, a telecom company dismissed a Muslim staffer who defied an instruction not to wear her veil at work. The UMYDF also reported that a church in Kampala dismissed a plumbing contractor upon realizing that he was a Muslim.

Users of social media made religiously intolerant and inflammatory statements. In August and October, Twitter users trolled and referred to evangelical minister Prophet Elvis Mbonye as a “false prophet” after Mbonye recorded a sermon in which he prophesied that the country’s lockdown restrictions to combat COVID-19, including on religious congregations, would soon end. In response, some Twitter users attacked his congregation as “lacking brains” for believing his preaching.

In January, the IRCU sent delegations from each faith community among its membership to travel to six towns in the eastern, northern, western, and central regions for peacebuilding and tolerance exercises with local officials, administrative officials, media, and civil society. On January 13, the IRCU called for a peaceful election, instructing its national, regional, and district-level committees to encourage tolerance, peace, and stability.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives regularly discussed religious freedom issues with government officials. The Ambassador met on several occasions with President Museveni and emphasized the government’s obligations to respect the rights of all persons, regardless of religious affiliation. In January, the Ambassador met with the IRCU to discuss the group’s efforts to expand peace-building initiatives around the country in advance of the January 14 elections. At the start of Ramadan on April 13, the Ambassador used the embassy’s social media platforms to promote religious tolerance, charity, and unity. Embassy representatives also met with local government officials in the eastern part of the country to promote religious tolerance.

Embassy representatives regularly engaged with religious leaders. Embassy representatives also met with the UMSC and the Kibuli Order of the Supreme Mufti (both Sunni umbrella organizations), Nadwa (a coalition of Muslim scholars), the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church of Uganda, and the Tabliq Sunni community to promote religious tolerance, education, and peacebuilding in the country.

The embassy used social media to publicize continued U.S. engagement and cooperation with the Muslim community. The embassy used social media to communicate seasonal greetings for both the Easter and Christmas holidays.

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