

Document #1436882

USDOS – US Department of State

2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Zambia

Executive Summary

The constitution declares the country a Christian nation while prohibiting religious discrimination and providing for freedom of conscience, belief, and religion. On October 18, the country commemorated its third National Day of Prayer and Fasting coordinated by the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs. During the government-sponsored event, President Edgar Lungu reaffirmed the country as a Christian nation. Segments of different opposition political parties, the Council of Churches in Zambia, and the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops did not take part in the event, stating that it blurred the line between church and state. Some religious groups continued to criticize the government's decision to build a Christian interdenominational church known as the “National House of Prayer,” saying it inherently discriminated against non-Christian faiths and breached constitutional provisions for church and state separation. The Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs introduced stringent administrative measures to regulate religious affairs, which religious groups said were excessively bureaucratic. The new procedures included a requirement of religious groups to fit under a larger church “mother body,” which may not be available to some smaller groups. Additionally, some religious leaders stated that new clearance procedures for foreign visitors coming to conduct religious activities were arduous and resulted in one denial of entry and one deportation.

Incidents of mob attacks and killings of individuals suspected of practicing witchcraft continued throughout the country. Victims were often elderly members of the community, reportedly associated with witchcraft. For example, in January an 80-year-old woman was brutally beaten and killed, and in July a 52-year-old man was hacked to death, both on suspicion of practicing witchcraft.

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. U.S. embassy representatives also met with religious leaders to discuss issues of religious freedom, interfaith relations, and the role of religion in promoting governance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 15.9 million (July 2017 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates, 95.5 percent of the country is Christian: 75.3 percent identify as Protestant and 20.2 percent as Roman Catholic. Among Protestants, the Anglican Church and evangelical and Pentecostal groups have the largest numbers of adherents. Approximately 2 percent of the population is Muslim, with smaller numbers of Hindus, Bahais, Buddhists, Jews, and Sikhs. Approximately 1.8 percent of the population adheres to other belief systems, including indigenous religions and witchcraft, and there are small communities that hold no religious beliefs. Many persons combine Christianity and indigenous beliefs.

Muslims 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. According to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahai of Zambia, the Bahai community consists of approximately 4,000 adherents located primarily in Northwestern and Southern Provinces. There are approximately 10,000 Hindus, mostly of South Asian descent and located largely in the Copperbelt and Lusaka. 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 Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs, established in 2016, has a mandate that includes the implementation of the country's declaration as a Christian nation, providing policy and legal framework on matters pertaining to Christian and religious affairs, and guidance on the promotion of national values, principles, and ethics. Ministry functions include preserving religious heritage sites and the coordination of public religious celebrations, such as the commemoration of the declaration as a Christian nation and the National Day of Prayer. The ministry's mandate also includes ensuring that Christian values are reflected in government, education, family, media, arts and entertainment, and business. The ministry is also charged with promoting church-state, interdenominational, and interfaith dialogue.

Faith-based organizations and religious groups may register their organizations through the Chief Registrar's Office in the Ministry of Home Affairs or through the Patent and Companies Registration Authority as a company. All are required to pay regular

statutory fees of approximately 750 kwacha (\$75) as stipulated by the law. If registered as a company, all faith-based organizations are required to seek clearance from the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs in addition to fulfilling other statutory requirements. To be registered, a group must have a unique name, possess a constitution consistent with the country's laws, and adhere to laws pertaining to labor and employment practices and criminal conduct.

To be registered by the chief registrar under the Ministry of Home Affairs, the registrar's office conducts a preliminary assessment to ascertain the authenticity of the applicants and a security check. Clearance for religious groups must also be obtained from the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs. To gain clearance, the religious group must provide documentation that includes the organization's constitution and a recommendation letter from a recognized mother body to which it is aligned. Major church mother bodies include the Zambia Conference for Catholic Bishops (formerly Zambia Episcopal Conference-Catholic churches), the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (evangelical Protestant churches), and the Council of Churches in Zambia (traditional Protestant churches). Based on its findings, the ministry provides recommendations to the chief registrar on any additional steps required to complete the registration.

Unlike for nonreligious organizations, under regulations put out by the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs, it is no longer sufficient for religious groups to inform law enforcement directly of their intent to hold a meeting or event outside of normal religious services. The regulations require clearance from the religious ministry first and for the religious group to belong to a mother body that has provided a validation letter. The religious group must submit the validation letter and documentation for the activity 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 the event.

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 through 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 Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs may make a recommendation to the tax authority for consideration of a tax exemption for religious groups. The recommendation is based on a 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 is not offered at all schools. The religious curriculum focuses on Christian teachings but also incorporates comparative studies of Islam, Hinduism, and traditional beliefs.

Entry into the country of foreign missionaries or clergy is also scrutinized by the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs. 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

By the end of the year, no legislation existed for the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs to specifically define its roles and responsibilities, leading to ambiguity regarding its mandate. According to religious groups, the administrative measures put in place by the ministry made the process of obtaining a permit to hold a religious gathering more bureaucratic. The Catholic and Protestant church mother bodies, along with leaders of numerous minority religious groups, continued to oppose the creation of the ministry, stating citizens were already able to practice their faith freely.

The Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs stated it instituted a new strategy in March aimed at curbing “false churches and prophets.” In her statement to Parliament, Minister of National Guidance and Religious Affairs Godfridah Sumaili announced requirements of affiliation to a church mother body for “accountability or supervision” and additional screening her ministry would perform for certain visa applications. Sumaili did not provide a clear definition of “false churches.” The minister stated the strategy intended to stop those “who are exploiting the favorable environment of religious freedom.”

Minority religious groups with no representative mother body expressed doubts about their ability to comply with regulations instituted during the year by the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs that require all religious groups to associate with a mother body. The ministry explained that foreign religious groups that did not belong to a mother body could work with their aligned embassy for validation by certifying the organization was registered in its country of origin.

On April 14, immigration authorities deported Nigerian Andrew Ejimadu (also known as “Seer 1”) on grounds of being a danger to peace and good order. On May 5, immigration authorities denied Zimbabwean Uebert Angel, founder of the Good News Church and Uebert Angel Ministries, entry into the country for a religious event. Angel allegedly insisted on holding a “Millionaire Academy” meeting for which he was charging a 1,995 kwacha (\$200) entry fee. Officials from the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs stated they would not allow any clergy to take advantage of persons they described as desperate for spiritual attention.

Religion remained a dominant theme surrounding politics in the country. Religious groups said there was self-censorship by clergy members who commented on governance issues. According to religious leaders, any clergy member 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 third National Day for Prayer and Fasting under the theme “Repentance, Promoting Peace and Reconciliation, Consolidating National Unity in Diversity.” Many church and political opposition leaders did not participate, stating the event blurred the line between church and state. Various religious groups announced a boycott of the event, which they stated was politically driven. During the event, authorities ordered all liquor traders to open after 6 p.m. instead of the prescribed 10 a.m. According to the government, the holiday was structured to enable the general public to commemorate it in a solemn and sober manner. During the event, President Lungu reaffirmed the country’s identification as a Christian nation. Major opposition political parties and several religious bodies stated the occasion was highly politicized by the ruling party and attracted mostly ruling party Patriotic Front supporters.

Prominent religious groups continued to state the government should not be involved in church affairs, such as the building of the proposed Interdenominational House of Prayer, which remained incomplete. The Council of Churches in Zambia and the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops continued to state the declaration of October 18 as a day of prayer and the building of the National House of Prayer should not be government driven. Several religious leaders outside the council agreed and expressed the same sentiment.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There continued to be incidents of mob violence against and killings of suspected practitioners of witchcraft, particularly elderly members of the community. In January police reported that an 80-year-old grandmother was brutally beaten and killed by her grandson. According to police, the grandson suspected the victim of practicing witchcraft, which he said led to the death of his son. The court case continued at the end of the year. In July police reported that Ignatius Silwimba of Nakonde, Muchinga Province, was hacked to death on suspicion of practicing witchcraft. Police were still conducting an investigation at the end of the year. In August police reported 10 killings of elderly persons in Muchinga Province on suspicion of practicing witchcraft. The killings took place in the first half of the year.

Some religious leaders from non-Christian communities continued to report being called “Satanist” for adhering to religious or denominational beliefs considered outside the mainstream. Bahai and Messianic Jewish community leaders in particular continued to express concerns that some church leaders and their followers singled out the practitioners of these communities as “Satanists.”

Leaders of religious organizations, including the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Council of Churches in 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 the restriction of government involvement in leading worship and religious practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials, including the Ambassador, frequently met with and attended events hosted by government officials, including the Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs, to discuss topics related to religious freedom, such as enforcement of registration laws, government-run religious observance, interfaith relations, and the use of religion to denigrate political opponents to obtain political advantage. For example, the Ambassador met with Minister of National Guidance and Religious Affairs Godfridah Sumaili in March to seek clarification on the ministry's role in regulating new and existing religious groups.

Embassy officials met with leaders of Christian, Muslim, Bahai, and other religious groups to discuss interfaith relations, discrimination, government regulations, religious broadcasts, and religious tolerance. These included an iftar hosted by the Ambassador for local Muslim leaders during Ramadan. He also engaged regularly with the Archbishop of Lusaka as well as with local religious leaders during travels around the country. In January the embassy hosted the leadership of the Oasis Forum, a consortium of civil society actors, including the three church mother bodies, to discuss issues of mutual concern, such as growing political tensions and the newly created Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2017)



Country:

Zambia

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State \(/en/source/11558.html\)](#)

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2017/af/280802.htm> (<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2017/af/280802.htm>)

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

29 May 2018

Document ID:1436882 (former ID [361691 \(/en/document/361691\)\)](/en/document/361691)

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

