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2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Rwanda

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of religion and worship. In September the government enacted a new law requiring faith-based organizations (FBOs) to obtain legal status before beginning operations. It also calls for legal representatives of FBOs and preachers with supervisory responsibilities eventually to hold academic degrees. In February the government closed more than 6,000 churches, mosques, and other places of worship it deemed in violation of health and safety standards and/or noise pollution ordinances. In March police arrested six pastors for organizing to defy the government’s order to close church buildings. All six were released later that month. Later in the year, the government permitted some of the places of worship to reopen after they made required infrastructure improvements. Muslim community leaders reported effective collaboration with police and local authorities, including collaboration on programs to combat extremism.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported Roman Catholic schools, including government-subsidized schools, required all students to attend Mass regardless of personal faith. Religious leaders reported numerous faith-based groups and associations contributed to greater understanding and tolerance by participating in interfaith meetings, organizing activities under the auspices of an interfaith religious leaders’ forum, and collaborating on community development projects.

Embassy representatives engaged the government and religious leaders on religious freedom and hosted interfaith events, including an iftar, where religious freedom and tolerance were among the key messages. The Ambassador hosted an interfaith lunch and emphasized the importance of interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12.2 million (July 2018). According to the 2012 census, the population is 44 percent Catholic; 38 percent Protestant, including Anglican, Pentecostal, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, and evangelical Christian churches; 12 percent Seventh-day Adventist; 2 percent Muslim; and 0.7 percent Jehovah’s Witnesses. Several other small religious groups, together

constituting less than 1 percent of the population, include animists, Baha'is, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and a small Jewish community consisting entirely of foreigners. Approximately 2.5 percent of the population holds no religious beliefs. The head office of the Rwanda Muslim Community (RMC) stated Muslims could constitute as much as 10 percent of the population. The majority of Muslims are Sunni, with a small number of Shia (200-300), according to the RMC. While generally there are no concentrations of religious groups in certain geographic areas, a significant number of Muslims live in the Nyamirambo neighborhood of Kigali.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, religion, worship, and public manifestation thereof even when the government declares a state of emergency. Exercising these rights may be subject to limitations to ensure respect of others' rights and good morals, public order, and social welfare. The constitution bars political parties based on religious affiliation. In September the government enacted a new penal code that stipulates religious discrimination is punishable by five to seven years in prison and fines of 500,000 to 1,000,000 Rwandan francs (\$560 to \$1,100).

On September 10, the government enacted a new law determining the organization and functioning of FBOs, which include religious groups and nongovernmental organizations associated with religious groups. Under the new law, which replaced a 2012 law governing religious groups, any organization, umbrella organization, or ministry that intends to begin operations must obtain legal status from the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB). According to the law, an FBO must submit the following to obtain legal status: an application letter addressed to the RGB; notarized statutes governing its organization; the address of its head office and the names of its legal representative and his/her deputy, their duties, full address, and criminal records; a document certifying the legal representative and his/her deputy were appointed in accordance with its statutes; a brief notarized statement explaining its doctrine; a notarized declaration of the legal representatives of the organization of consent to the responsibilities assigned to them; notarized minutes of the group's general assembly that established the organization, approved its statutes, and appointed members of its organs; a notarized document describing the organization's annual action plan and source of funding; a document indicating the building that meets the requirements of the building code of the area of operation; a letter issued by district authorities agreeing to collaborate with the organization; a partnership document issued by an umbrella organization of the organization's choosing; and proof of payment of a nonrefundable application fee. The law states the RGB must either issue a certificate of legal personality within 60 days of the date of receipt of the application or, in case of denial, send a written notice explaining the reasons for the denial within 30 days of the date of receipt of the application.

Under the law, if the RGB denies the FBO's application for legal status, the FBO may reapply when the reason for denial no longer exists.

The law further stipulates preachers with supervisory responsibilities must possess a degree in religious studies from an institution of higher learning or any other degree with a valid certificate in religious studies issued by a recognized institution. The law also requires that an FBO's legal representative hold a degree from an institution of higher learning. Government officials stated these requirements were necessary to prevent unqualified ministers from putting adherents at risk or exploiting adherents for personal gain. The law states that persons required to hold an academic degree shall have five years from the date of the law's enactment to comply the requirement.

The government grants legal recognition only to civil marriages.

By law, new public servants must take an oath of loyalty, which includes the phrase “so help me God.” Those who do not fulfill the requirement forfeit their position. The law does not make accommodations for religious minorities whose faith does not permit them to comply with this requirement.

The law establishes fines of one to two million Rwandan francs (\$1,100 to \$2,200) and imprisonment from one to two years for any individual who obstructs the practice of religious rituals. The law also prohibits public defamation of rituals, symbols, and cult objects. The penalty for doing so is imprisonment for a term of not less than 15 days but less than three months and a fine of 100,000 to 200,000 Rwandan francs (\$110 to \$220), or only one of these penalties.

The law regulates public meetings and states that any person who demonstrates in a public place without prior authorization is subject to eight days' to six months' imprisonment, a fine of 500,000 to 1,000,000 Rwandan francs (\$560 to \$1,100), or both. Penalties increase if the illegal meeting or demonstration is found to have threatened security, public order, or health. The law states that religious sermons must be delivered in designated facilities that meet the requirements of the law and that if an FBO intends to organize a special public gathering, it must seek authorization from the competent authority.

Under the law, FBOs are prohibited from causing noise pollution. Offenders are subject to a fine of 500,000 to 1,000,000 Rwandan francs (\$560 to \$1,100), and repeat offenders are subject to increased fines and up to one month's imprisonment. By law, FBOs may not use their faith, religious practices, and preaching to jeopardize national unity, peace and security, public order and health, good morals, good conduct, freedom, or the fundamental rights of others.

All students in public primary school and the first three years of secondary education must take a religion class on various religions. The Ministry of Education establishes the curriculum. The law does not specify either opt-out provisions or penalties for not taking part in the class. The law allows parents to enroll their children in private religious schools.

The government subsidizes some schools affiliated with different religious groups. A presidential order guarantees students attending any government-subsidized school the right to worship according to their beliefs during the school day, as long as their

religious groups are registered in the country and the students’ worship practices do not interfere with learning and teaching activities. The order does not stipulate any procedure for arranging special accommodations.

The law states FBOs may give their opinions on social or faith-related matters but may not engage in political activities to gain political power, organize debates to support political organizations or political candidates, register, or use any other means to support candidates for any public office.

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 prior residence, an authorization letter from the parent organization, and a fee of 100,000 Rwandan francs (\$110).

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

Government Practices

Following a February meeting between government officials, including the RGB and Ministry of Local Government, and religious leaders, the government closed more than 6,000 places of worship across the country that it deemed in violation of health and safety standards and/or noise pollution ordinances. The head of the RGB publicly stated authorities targeted churches that were conducting services in shoddy and unclean structures, which was detrimental to the health of worshippers. Kigali local authorities reported cases of noise pollution, a lack of required permits, and a proliferation of churches operating inside tents and unsanitary facilities. Leaders of major religious groups made statements supporting the closures, describing them as needed and timely. Some observers, however, expressed skepticism regarding the government’s motivation for closing the churches. A large number of the closed places of worship were evangelical Christian churches, although mosques, Catholic churches, and other Christian churches were also affected. Some were later allowed to reopen after making the required infrastructure improvements. The head of the RGB told the press that 14 percent of the buildings had reopened as of July. In many cases, those congregations whose buildings remained closed opted to hold worship services in hotels, private residences, or buildings belonging to other congregations; the RGB clarified that while some places of worship had been closed, religious organizations had not been closed. Following the church closures, police arrested six clergymen in March for organizing to defy implementation of the order. All six were released later that month.

On February 21, the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA) ordered Amazing Grace, a Christian radio station, to suspend operations for one month following a live broadcast on January 29 of a sermon by local pastor Nicolas Niyibikora in which he said women were “dangerous creatures of evil, going against God’s plans.” Women’s groups and journalists filed complaints with the Rwanda Media Commission (RMC), stating the language of the broadcast constituted discrimination and incitement to hate. Following

the station owner’s refusal to comply with RURA’s sanctions, in April RURA revoked the station’s broadcasting license. The station’s owner filed suit against RURA and RMC for violating his right to opinion and conscience. The case was pending at year’s end.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported in some cases they could negotiate alternatives to participating in compulsory community night patrols.

Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to report local officials’ retaliation against members who refused to sing the national anthem in school or take an oath while holding the national flag.

Jehovah’s Witnesses students were reportedly punished and dismissed from school for not attending religious services at school or not participating in military and patriotic activities at school.

Unregistered religious groups received a significant degree of government scrutiny of their leadership, activities, and registration application until they obtained FBO registration under the law. Small religious congregations sometimes temporarily affiliated with larger registered organizations in order to operate.

Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to pursue judicial remedies for civil servants and teachers dismissed for refusing to swear an oath on the flag. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that authorities included the names of those dismissed over the issue of oath-taking on an online list of persons considered unsuitable for public service, making it difficult for these individuals to obtain employment in the private sector as well. Jehovah’s Witnesses leadership also reported difficulties in securing appointments with authorities to discuss a range of legal requirements imposing certain limitations on their religious practices and beliefs.

Both Christian and Islamic places of worship were affected by noise ordinance restrictions and were required to decrease the volume on their sound equipment.

Some places of worship were also required to install soundproofing materials. In March local authorities in Kigali issued a directive prohibiting mosques from using loudspeakers to call worshippers to prayer. Authorities reversed the ban after Muslim leaders engaged them and reached a compromise allowing for the continued use of loudspeakers at an acceptable volume.

Government officials presiding over wedding ceremonies generally required couples to take a pledge while touching the national flag, a legal requirement that Jehovah’s Witnesses rejected on religious grounds. Jehovah’s Witnesses said the requirement made it difficult for them to marry legally because few officials were willing to perform the ceremony without the flag oath. For some Jehovah’s Witnesses, placing their hands on a Bible on top of the flag was an acceptable alternative. Jehovah’s Witnesses were not able to obtain a waiver and reported difficulties in getting an appointment with relevant authorities.

Muslim community leaders reported working collaboratively with the Rwanda National Police (RNP) in combating extremism and radicalization in the Muslim community. For example, on December 2, the RNP launched a campaign to educate young Muslims about the dangers of extremism in five of the country's 30 districts with the collaboration of Muslim leaders. In public remarks, the RNP commissioner for counterterrorism commended the role of Muslim leaders in educating the Islamic community on “the true meaning” of their faith. The Imam of Kigali, in turn, reiterated the community's commitment to working with security organs to fight radicalization and promote security.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Jehovah's Witnesses reported Catholic schools, including government-subsidized schools, required all students to attend Mass regardless of their personal faith.

Religious leaders reported numerous religious groups and associations contributed to greater religious understanding and tolerance by participating in interfaith meetings and collaborating on community development projects, such as providing assistance to HIV/AIDS patients and supporting government development initiatives. During the year, the Rwanda Religious Leaders Forum, an organization under the joint leadership of the Grand Mufti of Rwanda and Protestant, Catholic, Anglican, and evangelical Christian leaders, continued to pursue its stated aim of strengthening interfaith collaboration on education, combating gender-based violence, socioeconomic development, and unity and reconciliation. Activities included conferences on gender equality and a public dialogue on combating child abuse and unwanted pregnancies, and promoting positive parenting.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy representatives engaged with government officials, including RGB staff responsible for FBO registration, to discuss the new FBO law and plans for its implementation. The embassy also met with the Ministry of Education to discuss religious curriculum in schools and the RNP regarding their countering violent extremism program. Embassy representatives consulted with FBOs to identify concerns with the new law and raised them with senior government officials.

The embassy hosted interfaith discussions focused on religious diversity and included members of different religious groups in numerous public outreach programs it conducted in Kigali and throughout the country. In September the Ambassador hosted a lunch for representatives of the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Muslim community, and several evangelical Christian churches. The Ambassador emphasized the importance of interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. In June the Ambassador hosted an iftar attended by more than 45 guests, including the Mufti of Rwanda and representatives from the government, diplomatic corps, local universities, as well as 25 members of the Muslim community. In his remarks, the Ambassador emphasized the

importance of the freedom to practice one’s faith without persecution or fear and of interfaith efforts to build peace and promote tolerance. The Ambassador and embassy officials also engaged religious leaders through the Rwanda Religious Leaders Forum.

The embassy underscored the value of religious diversity and inclusion at key community events, including during the genocide commemoration, which featured interfaith prayers.

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