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2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Uganda

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Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and stipulates there shall be no state religion. It provides for freedom of belief and the right to practice and promote any religion and 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. The government restricted activities of religious groups it defined as "cults" and arrested hundreds of "cult" members who opposed government programs such as national identification card registration and the census. Local authorities closed a church for what they stated was interfering with the delivery of government services and demolished another because of what they said were concerns over healing practices and lack of a registration permit.

Local residents burned an Engiri church, a group the government characterized as a "cult," reportedly in response to what the residents perceived as interference with government programs.

The embassy organized speaker's programs, including a visit by a U.S. imam who was president of a foundation and of a state Islamic affairs council, to promote religious freedom and tolerance while countering violent extremism. In addition, the Ambassador issued Ramadan and Eid messages promoting religious tolerance, and the embassy sponsored Muslim outreach activities, including iftars.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 35.9 million (July 2014 estimate). According to government data, 85 percent is Christian, 12 percent Muslim, and 3 percent Hindu, Jewish, Bahai, or an adherent of indigenous beliefs. Among Christians, 42 percent are Roman Catholics, 36 percent Anglicans, 15 percent Pentecostal or Orthodox Christians, and 7 percent members of other Protestant denominations. The Muslim population is primarily Sunni. Indigenous religious groups practice in rural areas. Nationals of Indian origin or descent are the most significant non-African ethnic population and are primarily Shia Muslim or Hindu. The northern and West Nile regions are predominantly Roman Catholic and the Iganga District in the eastern region has the highest percentage of Muslims. There is a small indigenous Jewish community near the eastern town of Mbale.

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 and to belong to and participate in the practices of any religious body or organization in a manner consistent with the constitution. It prohibits the creation of political parties based on religion.

The government requires religious groups to register to obtain legal entity status. Larger groups, such as the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, Anglican Church, and the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council, obtain legal status by registering under the Trustees Incorporation Act (TIA) on a one-time basis. The Ministry of Internal Affairs' board for nongovernmental organizations (NGO board) registers smaller local religious groups, including evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Registration under the TIA or with the NGO board allows groups to access donor funding. The NGO board requires re-registration 12 months after the first registration issuance, 36 months after the second issuance, and 60 months after the most recent issuance for subsequent renewals. Religious organizations established under the TIA are free to operate anywhere in the country, unlike those registered with the NGO board, which are restricted to the areas listed in their registration. The law authorizes the NGO board to monitor the activities and operations of religious organizations, including sources of funding. The penalty for non-registration, including for religious groups, is closure of the organization.

In accordance with the constitution, religious instruction in public schools is optional, and the curriculum surveys world religious beliefs. Private schools are free to offer religious instruction.

Government Practices

The government imposed restrictions on minority religious groups it defined as "cults." Government policy defined a "cult" as a system of religious worship, often with a charismatic leader, which indoctrinated members with "unorthodox or extremist" views, practices, or beliefs. District security committees had the authority to determine whether a group was a "cult."

Authorities arrested suspected "cult" members who interfered with, or did not participate in, government programs. For example, between August 28 and September 6, authorities arrested and detained more than 160 people in the towns of Kibale, Kamwenge, Mubende, Mbale, Sembabule, Masindi, Kasese, Mitooma, Fort Portal, Namayingo, Ntungamo, and Kisoro for refusing to participate in the national census exercise due to their religious beliefs. Court proceedings for the suspects, who were charged with "interfering with government programs," were underway at the end of the year, and the suspects remained in custody. On September 6, police in Bugiri District arrested three members of a religious group known as Engiri for allegedly discouraging members of the group from participating in the census. On September 19, a court in Bugiri found the three guilty of "sabotaging government programs" and sentenced them to two years' imprisonment.

In August local authorities in Sembabule banned a group calling itself "666" from carrying out prayers in the district due to reports this group was disrupting the census exercise. Police arrested leaders Nathan Nalisa and Peter Kasita and charged them with "sabotaging government programs." The suspects remained in jail at year's end, pending hearing of the case.

Police arrested "cult" leaders who discouraged their followers from participating in the national identification card registration. For example, on July 17, police in the central region's Lyatonde District arrested and later released on bail Thomas Tumwesigye, Francis Tumugemwa, and Charles Bitwire, leaders of the "666" group who reportedly discouraged followers from participating in the registration. A police investigation into the matter was pending at year's end.

On August 1, the resident district commissioner for Ibanda District in the Western Region closed the church belonging to the Engiri group of believers for what the commissioner said was discouraging followers from taking their children to school and getting immunizations.

On August 24, local authorities in Kitgum District demolished a branch of the New Temple of Jerusalem Church following the death of a paralyzed man to whom the authorities said the group was administering reflexology and healing prayers. Local officials stated they were concerned about the healing activities and they demolished the church because its registration permit from the NGO board only allowed it to operate in Gulu and Lira districts and not in Kitgum.

Muslim Centre for Justice and Law (MCJL) officials reported authorities did not reopen the 10 madrassahs that were closed in March and July 2013 on grounds the schools failed to meet national education standards and were unhygienic. In contrast to 2013 reports, MCJL officials clarified that the Uganda Muslim Youth Assembly never filed a suit against the government over the closures.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On September 10, a mob in Buswale village burned down an Engiri church. The mob accused the church leaders of preventing children from attending school and obstructing the census exercise. There were no reports of government action against the perpetrators.

There were isolated reports of district courts ordering Muslim men to remove their head covering while attending court sessions. Court authorities said everyone was required to remove head coverings for security reasons, due to a lack of metal detectors.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy raised the issue of "cult" member arrests and the demolition of Kitgum District's New Temple of Jerusalem Church with the Uganda Police Force. The police force's director of human rights and legal services underscored the country's commitment to religious freedom but stated all citizens were required to follow the law regardless of their religious practices.

The embassy hosted a June 16-24 visit by a U.S. imam who was president of a foundation and of a state Islamic affairs council. Among other activities, the embassy hosted a roundtable discussion with the imam with Ugandan Muslim leaders, students, local government officials, NGO leaders, and members of the interreligious council. The program promoted religious freedom and tolerance within the interfaith community. The imam also spoke at mosques and to the media to discuss U.S. values, cultural diversity, religious pluralism, and tolerance.

The Ambassador issued Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr messages, which were broadcast on radio and television, to promote religious tolerance and respect for differences. The embassy sponsored a number of Muslim outreach activities, including iftars, to promote mutual religious understanding.

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