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2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - Burundi

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the state as secular, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for freedom of conscience and religion. It prohibits political parties from preaching religious violence or hate. Police and local administration continued to harass pilgrims visiting the site of a shrine to the Virgin Mary and called for the arrest of the woman who reported seeing the apparitions. The government introduced a bill to parliament that would greatly affect the ability of religious groups to function, including by prohibiting religious activities in "undignified settings" and retroactively barring the establishment of places of worship within 500 meters of each other. The bill failed a review by the Constitutional Court in November and was not signed into law but was pending at year's end.

Most religious groups were uninformed about the government's draft bill on religious activities. Of those that were at least somewhat familiar with it, many believed the bill, if enacted, would protect individuals from those the groups considered to be fraudulent religious leaders.

The U.S. embassy encouraged the government and societal leaders to continue to support broad-based religious tolerance. Embassy efforts included hosting an iftar and encouraging interfaith discussion of the collaborative role religious groups could play in disseminating a message of peace and tolerance to the population. The embassy also hosted an interfaith discussion of the proposed law to change administration of religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.4 million (July 2014 estimate). Although reliable statistics are not available, religious leaders estimate approximately 60 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, while 20 percent belongs to indigenous religious groups, and 15 percent to Protestant groups. Muslims constitute 2 to 5 percent of the population and live mainly in urban areas. Most Muslims are Sunni, although some are Shia, and there is also a small Ismaili community. There are approximately 100 Jains. The Jewish and Orthodox Christian communities are very small.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes a secular state, prohibits religious discrimination, recognizes freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and provides for equal protection under the law regardless of religion. It prohibits political parties from preaching religious violence, exclusion, or hate.

The law covering nonprofit organizations is the basis for recognition and registration of religious groups, which must register with the Ministry of Interior. Each religious group must provide the denomination or affiliation of the institution, a copy of its bylaws, the address of its headquarters in the country, an address abroad if the local institution is a subsidiary, and the names and addresses of the association's governing body and legal representative. Registration also entails identifying any property and bank accounts owned by the religious group. The ministry usually processes registration requests within two to four weeks. Leaders of religious groups who fail to comply or who practice in spite of denial of their registration are subject to six months' to five years' imprisonment.

The law does not grant tax exemptions or other benefits to religious groups.

Government Practices

The government continued to restrict the ability of pilgrims to visit a shrine in Businde, Gahombo, Kayanza Province, where a local woman, Eusebie, reported seeing regular visions of the Virgin Mary. The shrine continued to draw pilgrims, who visited the site in small groups or at night to avoid attracting official attention. In the fall the government called for the arrest of Eusebie, accusing her of posing a threat to public security. She reportedly went into hiding but was believed to remain in Burundi. According to Eusebie, in one of her visions she was told to call on the public to refuse food aid delivered by President Pierre Nkurunziza because it came from the devil. Eusebie's group remained unregistered with the government or (as a group that considered itself Catholic) with the Catholic Church as required by law. The Catholic Church did not recognize the group.

The three police officers arrested and tried for the 2013 deaths at the shrine were released in 2014. Of the 32 pilgrims arrested in the same incident, those who promised to never return to the shrine were released, but the others remained in jail. In December 2013 and January 2014, several hundred people were arrested at the shrine. Some of the pilgrims remained in jail at the end of 2014, but those who renounced their participation in the group were released.

Because of what it characterized as a concern for social harmony, the government introduced a draft bill that, if enacted, would greatly affect the freedom of religious groups to operate in Burundi. The bill included clauses prohibiting religious activities in "undignified" settings and retroactively disallowing the presence of places of worship within 500 meters of each other. It established a government body with undefined powers to oversee religious groups, stipulated minimum membership requirements for religious groups, and prohibited individuals from belonging to more than one religious group or from leaving one religious group to join another without the approval of the first group's leader.

The bill also proposed a long list of requirements for religious groups, including: annual submission to the government of a list of members and leadership; annual submission of proposed and past activities; conformity with accepted accounting systems; and legal representation by Burundian nationals. The Ministry of Interior would have the authority to suspend for six months the activities of any religious group it found to be in noncompliance with any of these requirements, with no possibility for appeal. Religious groups would also need to obtain approval from the governor of the provinces where they operated, engage in community works, ensure unity among their members, and respect noise ordinances.

According to a group of religious leaders who met to discuss the law, the bill did not favor any particular religious group and did not specify how the government would resolve conflicts between religious groups. The national assembly and senate passed the bill, but before signing it, the president requested that the Constitutional Court review its constitutionality. On October 31, the court found parts of the law unconstitutional because they infringed on the right of children to choose their religion and required Burundian nationality for religious group leaders. The court upheld the constitutionality of sections imposing punishment of up to five years' imprisonment to practicing members of religious groups denied registration and prohibiting membership in more than one religious group. At year's end, however, the entire bill remained unimplemented and unsigned, pending a response to the court's findings.

The government administration comprised both Christian and Muslim officials. The president was a Protestant while several prominent members of his cabinet were Catholic or Muslim.

The finance ministry often granted waivers of taxes on religious articles or goods that religious groups imported for social development purposes.

The Office of the President regularly granted land, a commodity in short supply, to domestic and international religious groups.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Most religious groups were uninformed about the government's proposed bill to substantially change its interaction with religious groups. Of those who were at least somewhat familiar with it, many believed that, if enacted, the bill would protect vulnerable people from those the groups considered to be false, predatory religious leaders. However, some of these leaders also expressed concerns that the law would force many religious groups to close or relocate, risked souring existing good relations between and among all religious groups, and the government had not consulted with religious groups about the law.

Leaders of major religious groups stated that these groups had amicable relations with each other and were able to peacefully resolve any differences. For example, Sunni and Shia Muslims cited their successful effort to

sort out parking for Friday worship in Bujumbura's Asian quarter, where many mosques were crowded close together. They noted that not only was the parking issue resolved, but that relations among the mosques also improved because of their coming together to work out the logistics.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy encouraged the government and societal leaders to continue to support broad-based religious tolerance. The embassy convened a group of 14 leaders from all the major religious groups to discuss the proposed law that would greatly affect religious groups' ability to operate in society.

The Ambassador hosted an iftar for approximately 60 leaders in the Muslim community and encouraged them to engage in discussions with leaders of other religious groups to deliver a joint message of peace to the population, particularly in the run-up to elections. The embassy also encouraged the government to welcome the participation of all religious groups to promote a message of harmony and mutual tolerance.
