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2016 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 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 some members who refused to participate based on religious grounds in government immunization drives. On December 27 and 29, police raided two mosques, without advanced notice, to search for evidence related to the November killing of a Muslim cleric, and other unspecified criminal activity. Police stated the December 27 raid resulted in the discovery of arms and incriminating documents; however, a spokesperson for the group that runs the mosque accused the police of desecrating a place of worship, planting evidence, removing documents, and stealing approximately 505 million Ugandan shillings (\$14,000). The Inspector General of Police apologized for the December 29 raid, noting the police acted on false intelligence. The Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) accused the government of discriminatory hiring practices against Muslims for both senior and lower-level positions.

On November 26, two unknown assailants shot and killed a Muslim cleric who was also a Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF) officer and his UPDF bodyguard in Kampala, after trailing his truck on a motorcycle. The police arrested and charged four clerics from a rival action of the Muslim Salafist Tabliq group for his killing. According to observers, many of the disputes within the Salafist Tabliq group, one of the country's main Muslim factions, were financially or politically motivated. As of year's end, the case was ongoing.

The embassy brought together civil society and religious leaders to promote religious tolerance and diversity. The Ambassador issued Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr messages promoting religious tolerance via radio and television. The embassy also organized a U.S. study tour for eight religious leaders to explore the role of faith-based organizations in a diverse democracy.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 38.3 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2014 national census, 39 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 32 percent Anglican, 14 percent Muslim, and 11 percent Pentecostal Christian. Other religious groups, which collectively constitute less than 5 percent of the population, include Seventh-day Adventists, adherents of indigenous beliefs, Baptists, Orthodox Christians,

Hindus, and those with no religious affiliation. The UMSC estimates Muslims are closer to 25 percent of the population. The Muslim population is primarily Sunni. Citizens and residents of Indian origin or descent are the largest non-African ethnic population and the Indian Association in Uganda reports the majority are Hindu. The Northern Region and West Nile Sub-Region are predominantly Roman Catholic, and the Iganga District in the Eastern Region has the highest percentage of Muslims. There is an indigenous Jewish community of approximately 2,000 people in and around 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 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 government requires religious groups to register to obtain legal entity status. The more established religious groups, such as the Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican Churches, and the UMSC, obtain legal status by registering under the on a one-time basis under new legislation enacted during the year. Upon the release of the new legislation, however, responsibility for the registration process shifted from the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ board for NGOs to the Department of Religious Affairs, under the Ministry of Ethics and Integrity. The Department of Religious Affairs has not yet provided public information about its registration process.

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.

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

Government Practices

In May media sources reported police arrested, and later released without charge, 10 members of the Njiri Nkalu religious group in the Mayuge district for refusing to allow their children to participate in a government immunization program. The Njiri Nkalu members said their religious beliefs prohibited them from participating. With police assistance, Ministry of Health officers forcibly entered Njiri Nkalu members’ homes and immunized approximately 200 children. Local officials considered the Njiri Nkalu a cult. 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.

After midnight on December 27, without advanced notice or warning, police raided a Salafi mosque in Kampala and arrested 14 individuals for suspected involvement in the November 26 killing of Muslim cleric Sheikh Mohammed Kiggundu, as well as other unspecified criminal activity. A spokesperson of the group that runs the mosque – the Jamaat Dawata Salafiya faction of the Tabliq group – accused the police of desecrating a place of worship, planting incriminating evidence, removing documents, and stealing approximately 50.5 million Ugandan shillings (\$14,000). The police said they found arms in the mosque and documents revealing unspecified criminal activity. The 14 individuals had not been released at year’s end.

On December 29, the police raided another mosque at approximately eight pm, detained worshippers in the venue until 11:00 a.m., and arrested 13 people.

Media reported in April that police in Masaka District cancelled a planned public prayer rally by Christian evangelical groups after a group of Muslim imams complained the evangelical preachers insulted Islam by publicly reading the Quran, which the clerics stated Islam prohibits. The police also arrested, but later released the same day without charge, Christian preacher Paul Serunjogi, who was one of the organizers of the prayer rally, after Muslim clerics accused him of provoking Muslims.

The UMSC accused the government of discriminatory hiring practices against Muslims, stating Muslims were not receiving fair consideration for senior positions and filled only a small number of low-level positions. UMSC reported Muslims comprised less than 10 percent of the total staff in most government agencies, considerably less than what the UMSC stated was their percentage of the population.

The UMSC also stated the government manipulated the 2014 National Population and Housing Census. In May a spokesperson of the UMSC rejected the approximately 14 percent Muslim population recorded in the census and accused officials of manipulating the statistics to justify what the spokesperson called “marginalization of Muslims.”

The UMSC reported the government reopened the madrassahs and mosques it had closed in 2015 based on allegations of terrorism and possible links to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On November 26, two unknown assailants shot and killed a Muslim cleric who was also a Uganda People’s Defense Force (UPDF) officer and his UPDF bodyguard in Kampala, after trailing his truck on a motorcycle. A week before the killing, the cleric, Major Muhammad Kiggundu, said on a local FM station that clerics from a rival faction of his Tabliq group had accused him of falsely implicating them in previous killings of Muslim clerics, and sent him death threats. The police arrested and charged four clerics from a rival Muslim faction for his killing. According to observers, the conflict between the factions was largely politically and financially motivated, and the motivations included a public dispute over management rights to a lucrative commercial property in Kampala owned by the Tabliq group. As of year’s end, the case was ongoing.

Between 2012 and 2015 gunmen killed at least nine Muslim leaders, with most of the shootings at close range. The government stated the ADF ordered the killings, but most Muslim leaders asserted the killings were related to a leadership struggle within the Tabliq group, which follows tenets of Salafist Islam. The trial of 14 suspects for the killing of two of the clerics, and the attempted killing of four other clerics, resumed on October 17 and was ongoing at year’s end.

On June 18, media reported Uganda Christian University, a school that has Anglican and non-Anglican students, banned all non-Anglican forms of worship on its campus, stating it had to protect its Anglican values from external influence. A coalition of students from other universities petitioned the speaker of parliament to overturn the ban but received no response by year’s end.

Muslim staff at Lubiri Secondary School, a secular public high school in Kampala, reported the institution’s Christian head teacher discriminated against Muslim students and staff by prohibiting female students from wearing the hijab and recommending the transfer of Muslim teachers away from the school to other public schools.

The Equal Opportunities Commission did not report by year’s end whether it had investigated a group of Muslim women’s 2015 allegations that private companies denied them employment because they refused to remove their hijabs, which the companies said violated their dress code. According to the Muslim Center for Justice and Law, in 2015 approximately 10 Muslim women said private companies did not hire them because they refused to remove their hijabs, which the companies stated violated their dress codes.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In June and July the Ambassador broadcast Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr messages on radio and television channels to promote religious tolerance and respect for differences. The Ambassador also hosted an iftar attended by academics and religious and community leaders to promote mutual religious understanding and to help strengthen the embassy’s relationships with the Muslim community. In July and August the embassy hosted digital video conferences between representatives of U.S. civil society and local Muslim leaders to promote religious tolerance. The embassy promoted the events on the embassy’s social media platforms.

In August the embassy sponsored eight individuals on an exchange program to examine the role of faith-based organizations in the United States. The program brought together civil society and religious leaders to learn about the interplay between religion and politics in the United States and to understand better how faith-based organizations and religious leaders work to protect the rights of citizens whose beliefs and lifestyles may be different from their own. The project also explored the connection between religious conviction, charity, and community service.