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2017 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, 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, due to religious reasons, in government immunization drives. Local media reported that the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA) Executive Office’s Religious Affairs Department Director, Reverend Aaron Mwesigye, said the government intended to increase regulation of the activities of faith-based organizations to make them more accountable and transparent. The Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) said the government continued to discriminate against Muslims when hiring senior and lower-level officials.

The High Court acquitted 14 individuals in the killing of nine Muslim leaders between 2012 and 2015 but convicted six of the defendants of terrorism.

The embassy brought together religious leaders to promote religious tolerance and diversity. The Ambassador issued Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr messages on social media platforms promoting religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 39.6 million (September 2017 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, Jews, and those with no religious affiliation. The UMSC estimates Muslims (primarily Sunni) are closer to 25 percent of the population. According to the Indian Association in Uganda, the largest non-African ethnic population is of Indian origin or descent, the majority of which is Hindu.

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. According to the Uganda Registration Services Bureau (URSB), the government requires faith-based organizations (FBOs) to register as not-for-profit companies with the URSB and then secure a five-year operating license from MOIA. Although there are no formal criteria to be exempted from the operating license requirement, in practice, larger religious groups, including the Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Seventh-day Adventist Churches, and the UMSC, are exempt and not required to obtain an operating license.

In accordance with the constitution, religious instruction in public schools is optional. The state has developed separate curricula for a number of world religions, including Christianity and Islam. Public primary and secondary schools may choose which, if any, religious studies to incorporate into their curriculum; however, they must adhere to the state-approved curriculum for each religion they choose to teach.

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

Government Practices

On September 11, local media reported that the Uganda Police Force (UPF) in Tororo District arrested John Kariak, a member of the Christian Church religious group, for prohibiting the vaccination of his children under a government polio immunization program. A local government leader said a number of the group’s members and their children fled the village when the immunization program staff arrived. Kariak said his religious group also prohibited education from outside the group. Local police said they were not aware if Kariak was arraigned or released.

According to local media, the UPF in January released the suspects it arrested in raids on two Salafi mosques in Kampala in December 2016 and publicly apologized to the Muslim community, stating the police had “acted on false intelligence.” The UPF raided the two mosques and arrested 14 individuals for suspected involvement in the November 2016 killing of Muslim cleric Sheikh Mohammed Kiggundu and other unspecified criminal activity.

On May 5, local media reported that the MOIA Religious Affairs Department Director, Reverend Aaron Mwesigye, said the government intended to increase regulation of FBOs' activities to make them more accountable and transparent. He added that without these regulations, FBOs could “lead to insecurity, and gross exploitation or manipulation of the citizens.” Some evangelical Christian ministers stated the government's plan, which included setting age and academic qualifications to be licensed to lead an evangelical church, would violate religious freedom, since it would give government undue authority over religious practices. Mwesigye denied the government aimed to control FBOs, stating that it sought “to develop a framework guiding the organizations' operations.”

The UMSC said the government continued to discriminate against Muslims when hiring senior as well as lower-level officials. The UMSC stated the government had taken no steps to address what it described as its discriminatory hiring practices against Muslims. In 2016, the UMSC reported that fewer than 10 percent of government employees were Muslim, while, according to its estimates, Muslims constituted 25 percent of the population. The most recent census reported Muslims at 14 percent of the population.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On August 21, the High Court convicted six of the 14 defendants of terrorism who were accused of involvement in the killings of nine Muslim leaders from 2012 to 2015 but acquitted all 14 of murder. The court sentenced the six to life imprisonment, which they appealed. The appeal was pending at year's end.

The state charged eight persons in the 2016 killing of a Muslim cleric, who was also a Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF) major, and his UPDF bodyguard. The state also charged the suspects with terrorism, accusing them of recruiting and training new members of the Allied Democratic Forces from 2010 to 2017. As of year's end, the case was pending.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

During a June 12 iftar, the Ambassador urged religious leaders and communities to continue promoting interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. On September 1, in recognition of Eid-ul-Adha, the Ambassador tweeted well wishes to the Muslim community and called for religious tolerance.

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