

ZIMBABWE 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom to practice, propagate, and give expression to one's religion, in public or in private and alone or with others. The criminal code prohibits statements that are "insulting" or "grossly provocative" and that cause offense to persons of a particular race, tribe, place of origin, color, creed, or religion, or intend to cause such offense. In September, the government enacted the Marriages Act that prohibits marriage under the age of 18. The act also explicitly recognizes the roles of faith leaders practicing Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and "any religion" to solemnize marriages according to the rites of their faiths.

According to one faith leader, security services targeted religious officials who criticized the government, and while the government respected freedom of worship, it did not respect freedom of speech, forcing some religious leaders to self-censor. In September, President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa implored Parliament to prioritize finalizing amendments to the Private Voluntary Organization (PVO) Act. If passed, the amendments would require all trusts, including faith-based organizations, to register as PVOs. Some religious leaders said they planned to urge Parliament to reject the amendments. In the lead up to the August elections, government and Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) leaders embarked on an outreach campaign to religious groups to bolster support for their electoral victory. A Christian leader stated in some cases the government coerced religious leaders to invite the President and other senior government and party officials to religious gatherings where they sometimes pledged their electoral support. Religious leaders were active in calling for peace around and monitoring the elections.

Throughout the year, religious leaders continued regular interfaith

engagement across the Zimbabwe Interreligious Council (ZIRC) interfaith platform, which convenes Christians and Muslims to “promote peace, reconciliation, good governance and holistic human development through interfaith action and collaboration.”

In meetings with the government, U.S. embassy officials raised concerns about the likely impacts of the draft amendments to the PVO bill on faith-based and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and their ability to provide essential services, if enacted in its current form. In December, officials from the U.S. Department of State’s Office of International Religious Freedom visited the country and met with a broad range of religious leaders to discuss issues of religious freedom and understand their priorities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.8 million (midyear 2023). According to the 2022 nationwide Demographic and Health Survey by the government statistics agency, the most recent such survey, 85.3 percent of the population is Christian – 40.3 percent Apostolic, 17 percent Pentecostal, 13.8 percent other Protestant, 6.4 percent Roman Catholic, and 7.8 percent other Christian. According to the survey, 11 percent of the population reports no religious affiliation, less than 2 percent adheres uniquely to traditional beliefs, and less than 1 percent is Muslim. Muslim leaders describe their community as larger than 1 percent and growing. Government officials agree it is growing, but data to support that view was not available.

While there are no reliable statistics regarding the percentage of the Christian population that combines traditional practices with Christianity, religious leaders report a continued increase in this fusion.

Most of the Muslim population lives in rural areas and some high-density suburbs, with smaller numbers living in other suburban neighborhoods. There are also small numbers of Greek Orthodox, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Baha’is, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus

Christ), and humanists. Greek Orthodox and Jewish communities describe their membership as aging and diminishing in numbers.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious belief and provides for freedom of religion and the freedom to practice, propagate, and give expression to one's religion in public or in private and alone or with others. It recognizes the right of prisoners to communicate with and receive visits from their chosen religious counselor. It stipulates these rights may be limited by law during a state of emergency or by a law that considers, among other things, the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, health, regional or town planning, or the general public interest. Any such law must not impose greater restrictions on these rights than is necessary to achieve the purpose of the law. Although the law restricts freedom of assembly, expression, and association, it specifies that it is not meant to apply to public gatherings "held exclusively for bona fide religious, educational, recreational, sporting, or charitable purposes."

Since September, the law has prohibited marriages under the age of 18. The law explicitly recognizes the roles of faith leaders practicing Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and "any religion" to solemnize marriages according to the rites of their respective faiths.

The criminal code prohibits statements that are "insulting" or "grossly provocative" and that cause offense to persons of a particular race, tribe, place of origin, color, creed, or religion, or intend to cause such offense. Individuals convicted under this law are subject to a fine, imprisonment for a period not exceeding one year, or both.

The government does not require religious groups to register, although

religious groups operating schools or medical facilities must register those institutions with the appropriate ministry. Religious groups, as well as schools and medical facilities run by religious groups, may receive tax-exempt status. Income earned by churches and religious institutions from trade and investments, however, is subject to taxes. Religious groups may apply for tax-exempt status and duty-free privileges with the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, which generally grants these requests. To obtain tax-exempt status, a group is required to bring a letter of approval from a church umbrella organization confirming the group's status as a religious group. Examples of organizations that can approve such letters include the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC), Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), the Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe, and the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Zimbabwe (SCIAZ). The Zimbabwe Revenue Authority generally grants a certificate of tax-exempt status within two to three days of receipt.

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education sets curricula for public primary and secondary schools. Many public primary schools require a religious education course focusing on Christianity but mentioning other religious groups. There is no provision for opting out of religious instruction courses at the primary level. Students may opt out at the secondary level at age 14 and older, when they begin to select their courses. The government does not regulate religious education in private schools but must approve the employment of headmasters and teachers at those schools. Private schools run by religious organizations may take religious affiliation into account in their admission decisions and may mandate students participate in religious rites.

Some vaccinations are required for public school enrollment, but not for private schools.

It is unconstitutional to recite the national pledge in schools on the grounds that it would violate students' right to freedom of conscience. The pledge includes the phrase "Almighty God."

The law requires all international NGOs registered as PVOs, including religiously affiliated NGOs, to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the government defining the NGO's activities and zones of geographic coverage. The law stipulates international NGOs "shall not digress into programs that are not specified in the MOU as agreed upon by line ministries and registered by the Registrar." Local NGOs, including those that are faith-based, have no legal requirements to sign an MOU with the government but are required by law to notify local authorities of their intended operations prior to their registration. The law gives the government the authority to "deregister any private voluntary organization that fails to comply with its conditions of registration."

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

Government Practices

Religious and civil society groups reported increased government monitoring of public events, prayer rallies, church congregations, and activities of religiously affiliated NGOs perceived to be critical of the government. NGOs and religious leaders continued to report security services targeted some religious officials who engaged in political discourse perceived as negative toward the government. One religious leader stated while the government respected freedom of worship, it did not respect freedom of speech, which forced some religious leaders to self-censor their speeches. Another religious leader reported receiving phone calls from unknown persons warning religious leaders to be careful of what they say in sermons and in messages in pastoral letters. According to the religious leader, in some cases the unknown callers told religious leaders, "We are watching your statements."

In September, President Mnangagwa encouraged Parliament to prioritize finalizing amendments to the PVO Act. Members of civil society groups, said if passed in the current draft, the amendments would require all trusts, including faith-based organizations, to register as PVOs. According to the

representatives, the amendments would increase reporting requirements for PVOs, impose vague and potentially arbitrary registration requirements that could limit legitimate civil society work, ban immoral or illegitimate funding sources (without defining what these are), criminalize work perceived to support or work against any political party or candidate, set civil and criminal penalties for lack of compliance, and allow the government to suspend board members and replace them with government-appointed trustees who could control a PVO's funding and operations, with few limitations.

A religious leader stated the government explained the rationale behind the PVO Act was to curb money laundering by some unscrupulous businesses registered as trusts. A different leader stated President Mnangagwa delayed signing the bill in the previous session of parliament because of submissions from civil society and church leaders highlighting its likely negative implications. The religious leader said he and other religious leaders planned to engage parliamentarians to urge them to reject the bill once parliamentary debate began.

In the lead up to the August elections, government and ZANU-PF leaders embarked on an outreach campaign to religious groups to seek their political support. Media sources reported President Mnangagwa changed the election date from a Saturday to a midweek date following lobbying from Apostolic groups who worship on Saturdays. One Christian leader stated in some cases the Office of the President and Cabinet had coerced religious leaders to invite President Mnangagwa and other senior officials to religious gatherings where they canvassed for votes. The religious leader added when President Mnangagwa and other senior officials attended religious gatherings, they were accompanied by security personnel holding guns, which intimidated worshippers. A religious leader from the Apostolic community stated pro-government politicians had reached out to Apostolic groups to seek votes in the August elections but in exchange had offered no plans to address some of the societal challenges facing the communities including limited access to education, abuse of women, child marriages, and teen pregnancies.

According to media, Vice President Constantino Chiwenga addressed Christian worshippers at a Palm Sunday event in Harare's Highfield suburb where he called for peace and calm ahead of the general elections. On April 9, President Mnangagwa addressed an Easter church service at the Zion Christian Church in Masvingo where he called for unity among Zimbabweans before, during, and after the elections. "We may speak different languages, but from Zambezi to Limpopo we are one," he stated. On April 25, President Mnangagwa addressed various Apostolic leaders at State House (his official residence) where the church leaders, representing a group called Vapostori for ED (the President's first two initials) promised to deliver 2.3 million votes for President Mnangagwa in the election. Media outlets reported Vapostori for ED and Pastors for ED openly campaigned for the President and ZANU-PF. President Mnangagwa promised the religious leaders that he would consider their request to establish a ministry of religion, pledged to ensure freedom of worship was enjoyed by all Zimbabweans, and promised to engage traditional leaders whom the religious leaders said had sometimes interfered with their activities.

On June 3, President Mnangagwa and Vice President Chiwenga addressed thousands of worshippers from various Apostolic denominations in Harare and called on them to vote for ZANU-PF. One of the religious leaders who represented Vapostori for ED at the meeting pledged the Apostolic groups would pray for President Mnangagwa to win the election.

Media sources reported on June 17, President Mnangagwa, accompanied by Vice President Chiwenga and Defense Minister Oppah Muchinguri, asked approximately 20,000 Anglican worshippers gathered at the shrine to missionary Bernard Mizeki to vote for the President and ZANU-PF in the elections. Anglican leaders requested the government's support to install two solar powered water boreholes at the shrine. Chiwenga thanked the Anglican leaders for inviting the government officials, stating this demonstrated the strong bond between the church and the government. In September, *Newsday* reported President Mnangagwa had facilitated the installation of the boreholes and promised to designate the shrine a national

heritage site.

A religious leader criticized government leaders' efforts to divide the religious community by creating a parallel organization, the Zimbabwe Indigenous Inter-Denominational Council of Churches (ZIICC), to counter the influence of the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) and promote the government's partisan agenda. The ZHOCD consists of the ZCC, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference, the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa, and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe. The ZIICC continued to urge support for the government and criticized other Christian leaders who were critical of the government.

On July 21, the ZCC published a pastoral letter calling for peace ahead of the elections. The ZCC called "upon all Zimbabweans, as responsible citizens, to prioritize the sanctity of life and respect the exercise of human rights as enshrined in our national constitution. These rights include freedom of association, assembly, and expression, which fosters a multi-party democracy." The ZCC criticized political polarization, violence, continued use of hate speech, and a decline in women's participation. The ZCC encouraged all political actors to refrain from violence and to promote peace and tolerance. On the same day, the ZHOCD issued a statement encouraging citizens to uphold peace ahead of the elections and calling for transparency and fairness as key tenets of free, fair, and credible elections. The ZHOCD condemned "the systematic, denial or banning of other political parties to campaign freely throughout the country", adding "denying other political parties to sell their ideas to the electorate, is a key violation of constitutional provisions, such as freedom of assembly and association."

On August 4, the ZHOCD facilitated a national peace pledge signing ceremony in Harare where political parties contesting the elections pledged to keep the peace during the electoral cycle. ZHOCD President Bishop Never Muparutsa spoke at the event, urging political parties to safeguard peace and shun violence. The ZHOCD organized similar signing ceremonies in provinces across the country. On August 17, leaders of the ZCC presided over a prayer breakfast in Gweru, where ZCC President Ignatius Makumbe

urged political parties to refrain from violence. On August 22, the ZHOCD hosted a similar event in Harare where representatives of eight political parties contesting the elections made similar pledges to maintain peace during and after the elections.

The ZCC deployed observers across the country during the elections under its “I Pray I Vote” campaign. In a September statement, the ZCC said the elections were characterized by “significant flaws” and “fell significantly short of the elections we wanted and prayed for as they have once again produced a contested presidential result.” The ZCC called for honest and inclusive national dialogue and engagement towards establishing a firm foundation for the country’s transformation. A ZCC affiliated religious leader stated the organization had engaged political leaders from the ruling party and the opposition to foster inclusive national dialogue and to promote post-election peace. ZCC also engaged leaders of security agencies to explore how they could work with religious communities to foster peace.

Most official state and school gatherings and functions continued to include nondenominational Christian prayers, as did political party gatherings and parastatal meetings. According to one religious activist, every school day began with a prayer. Members of the judiciary and government officials, upon assuming office, often swore on the Bible, but this was not required by law or practice.

The government continued to enforce a 2018 ban on all radio and state-run television programs advertising prophets and traditional healing, for example selling “tickets to heaven” or a traditional cure for HIV/AIDS. Sources said, however, that the proliferation of online media made these bans less effective.

A representative from the Humanist Society of Zimbabwe said it was difficult to be nonreligious in the country. He said he kept his humanist views hidden; younger humanists used pseudonyms on social media and associated with each other privately for fear of reprisal and ostracization by family, co-workers, and other community members in a society they viewed

as centered around religion in general and Christianity in particular.

During the year, churches and faith-based organizations continued to distribute copies of the constitution and led dialogues on citizen rights.

According to a leader from Ruvheneko Rwenyenyezi Trust (RRT), an Apostolic organization, while his organization did not receive direct funding from the government, it received land to build new structures. Plans included an orphanage, school, and hospital. The leader stated, “We are with the government 100 percent.”

A cholera outbreak in September killed more than 100 persons and infected more than five thousand individuals in 41 districts across the country, forcing the government to ban large gatherings including religious meetings. On October 11, the cabinet announced it had formed committees comprising religious and traditional leaders to facilitate public health measures to curb the disease. Religious leaders reported cooperating with government officials as well as with the United Nations in efforts to combat the cholera outbreak. They also reported efforts to combat malaria by educating their members on prevention and cure. One religious leader reported joining efforts with the government to combat drug abuse by engaging young people and teaching them about the dangers of drug abuse and how to prevent them.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Representatives of the country’s religious organizations continued to say that interfaith relations were strong, including a high degree of tolerance for religious diversity among the country’s citizens. Religious leaders continued regular interfaith engagement through the ZIRC interfaith platform, which convened Christians and Muslims “to promote peace, reconciliation, good governance and holistic human development through interfaith action and collaboration.” For example, ZIRC provided peace-building training to

leaders from various religious and faith groups ahead of the August elections.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings with ministers and other senior government officials, including from the Ministries of Justice and Public Service, and Labor and Social Welfare, embassy officials raised concerns about the likely impacts of the draft PVO Amendment bill on faith-based and other NGOs and their ability to provide essential services, if the bill were enacted in its current form.

From December 6-8, officials from the Department of State's Office of International Religious Freedom visited the country and met with a broad range of religious leaders and faith-based organizations. In their meetings, the officials underscored the importance of respect for religious tolerance and diversity.

In October, the Chargé met with leaders from a range of religious organizations to discuss the status of religious freedom in the country and the role of religious leaders in national reconciliation. In the meeting, the Chargé and embassy officials expressed appreciation to religious leaders for their continued efforts to promote peace, human rights, and social cohesion as well as to raise awareness on issues such as child marriages and combating diseases.

Embassy representatives also maintained regular contact with religious leaders to encourage support for religious diversity and tolerance. For example, in June, the Chargé and other embassy officials met with members of the Church of Jesus Christ to discuss their perspectives on religious freedom in the country.

The embassy's social media platforms encouraged religious freedom as a basic human right and highlighted the important role religious communities can play in promoting peace, dialogue, and development. After the Chargé met with leaders from the religious community in October, the embassy used its social media platforms to highlight the same. The embassy

reinforced the message in December following the visit by officials from the Office of International Religious Freedom.