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2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Rwanda

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of religion and worship. In January the Rwanda National Police (RNP) shot and killed an imam while in custody. RNP officers shot and killed three other Muslim community members in August in Bugarama. The latter incident came two days after another Muslim was shot and killed by the RNP in Kigali. In each case, the government issued statements indicating the individuals were suspected of having links to foreign terrorist organizations. Muslim community members expressed concern about the killings and about the arrests of more than 20 members of the Muslim community. The High Council of Muslims introduced a ban on wearing the *niqab*, which was endorsed by the RNP as a measure to bolster security and combat terrorism. Compulsory service in night patrols and reciting the pledge of allegiance to the nation while holding the national flag during certain civil ceremonies was required of all citizens, including Jehovah's Witnesses, despite their religious objections. Thirty-six Jehovah's Witnesses were dismissed for their refusal to touch the national flag while taking the oath required of civil servants. Seventh-day Adventist students attending Catholic-affiliated public schools regularly faced the risk of suspension and expulsion for missing classes scheduled on their Sabbath.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported Catholic schools required all students to attend Mass regardless of personal faith. Christian leaders reported Islamic schools required all female students to wear headscarves in class as well as outside schools until they reached their homes. Religious leaders reported numerous faith-based groups and associations contributed to greater understanding and tolerance by participating in interfaith meetings and collaborating on community development projects.

Embassy representatives engaged the government and religious leaders on religious freedom and hosted interfaith events, including an iftar, where religious freedom and tolerance were among the key messages.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 13 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2012 census, the population is 44 percent Roman Catholic, 11.9 percent Seventh-day Adventist, 37.9 percent other Protestant denominations, 2 percent Muslim, and 0.7 percent Jehovah's Witnesses. Several other small religious groups, together constituting less than 1 percent of the population, include animists, Bahais, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and a small Jewish community consisting entirely of foreigners. Approximately 2.5 percent of the population holds no religious beliefs. The Head Office of the Rwanda Muslim

Community (RMC) stated Muslims could constitute as much as 10 percent of the population. The majority of Muslims are Sunni, with a small number of Shia (200-300), according to the RMC. While generally there are no concentrations of religious groups in certain geographic areas, residents of the Nyamirambo district of Kigali, known as "the Muslim Quarter," are mainly Muslim. There is no significant correlation between religious affiliation and socioeconomic status.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship and its public manifestation even when the government declares a state of emergency. Exercising these rights may be subject to limitations in order to ensure respect of others' rights and good morals, public order, and social welfare. The constitution bars political parties based on religious affiliation. The penal code stipulates religious discrimination is punishable by five to seven years in prison and fines of 100,000 to 1 million Rwandan francs (\$123-\$1,227).

Under the law governing religious groups, all groups "whose members share the same beliefs, cult, and practice" must register with the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) to acquire legal status. According to the law, a faith-based organization (FBO) must submit the following in order to register: an application letter addressed to the chief executive of the RGB; authenticated statutes governing its organization, including provisions stipulating its activities; general information including the location of its head office and the names of its legal representative, his/her deputy, their duties, full address, curricula vitae, and criminal records; a document certifying the legal representative and his/her deputy were appointed in accordance with its statutes; a brief statement describing its major doctrines; the minutes of the group's general assembly which approved the statutes of the organization; an action plan for the fiscal year; and an endorsement letter issued by the district mayor. No FBO is allowed to operate without an RGB-issued registration.

The law covering religious groups does not address nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) associated with religious groups. Domestic NGOs associated with religious groups are required to register with the RGB, but under a different law governing NGOs. The law details a multistep NGO registration process, and requires annual financial and activity reports and action plans.

The government grants legal recognition only to civil marriages.

New public servants are required by law to take an oath of loyalty "in the name of God almighty" and touch the flag while reciting the oath. The law does not make accommodations for religious minorities whose faith does not permit them to comply with this requirement.

The law establishes fines of 20,000 to 1 million Rwandan francs (\$25-\$1,227) and imprisonment from eight days to five years for anyone who hinders the free practice of religion; publicly humiliates rites, symbols, or objects of religion; or insults, threatens, or physically assaults a religious leader.

The law regulates public meetings, including assemblies for religious reasons, that may disturb public order or are deemed politically sensitive, and establishes fines of 100,000 to 5 million Rwandan francs (\$123-\$6,135) and imprisonment of eight days to three years for unauthorized public meetings. Governing authorities are required to respond within 15 days to requests by FBOs to hold special meetings in public. The specific governing authority is the local, regional, or national official depending on where the meeting takes place. There are no provisions on approval for routine meetings under the law.

For nighttime meetings, including religious meetings, local authorities often require advance notification, particularly for ceremonies involving amplified music and boisterous celebrations. Laws prohibit excessive noise that disrupt neighborhoods and undermine property values, and impose fines for violations ranging from 10,000 to 100,000 Rwandan francs (\$12-\$123). Nighttime noise disturbances may be punished by imprisonment of eight days to two months and/or a fine of 50,000 to 1 million Rwandan francs (\$61-\$1,227). Religious organizations are required to conform to laws protecting public security, public health, good morals, and human rights.

Unregistered religious groups may congregate after informing local authorities and can be granted a temporary registration certificate while the legal application process, which might last well over a year, remains ongoing.

All students in public primary school and the first three years of secondary education must take a religion class that discusses various religions. The curriculum is established by the Ministry of Education. The law does not specify either opt-out provisions or penalties for not taking part in the class. The law allows parents to enroll their children in

private religious schools.

The government subsidizes some schools affiliated with different religions. A presidential order guarantees students attending any government-subsidized school the right to worship according to their beliefs during the school day, as long as their religious groups are registered in the country and the students' worship practices do not interfere with learning and teaching activities. The order does not stipulate any procedure for arranging special accommodations.

The law prohibits religious groups from engaging in activities designed to achieve political power, defined as supporting political organizations or candidates for public office.

Every foreign missionary must have a temporary resident permit and a foreign identity card. Specific requirements to obtain the permit (valid for two years and renewable) include a signed curriculum vitae, an original police clearance from the country of residence, an authorization letter from the parent organization, and a fee of 100,000 Rwandan francs (\$123).

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

Government Practices

On January 23, the Rwanda National Police (RNP) shot and killed an imam while in custody. The RNP reported the imam was trying to escape while in transit from his residence to the Kanombe police station. RNP officers shot and killed three other Muslim community members on August 19 in Bugarama. The RNP reported the three were trying to escape after resisting arrest. The latter incident came two days after another Muslim was shot and killed by the RNP in Kigali. In all three cases, the RNP issued statements indicating the individuals were suspected of having links to foreign terrorist organizations. Muslim community members expressed concern about police killings of members of the Muslim community, which they said took place under questionable circumstances. Media sources reported more than 20 other Muslims were arrested and accused of seeking to establish ties with international jihadist groups.

In July the RNP issued a statement in support of the Rwanda High Council of Muslims' (HCM) ban on women wearing the *niqab*, which the HCM instituted earlier in July. The RNP statement said it was a measure to bolster security and combat terrorism. The HCM oversees Muslim affairs, but does not have the authority to make laws. According to media sources, the RMC campaigned for the ban through social media and posters at various mosques warning individuals against wearing the *niqab*.

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to report local officials' retaliation against members who refused to sing the national anthem in school or participate in community night patrols and government-sponsored "solidarity" civil and military training. The RNP arrested 10 Jehovah's Witnesses during the year for refusing on religious grounds to participate in community night patrols that required carrying batons and performing work similar to that of the police. Police held the detainees for periods ranging from two to nine days before releasing them without charge. More than 100 Jehovah's Witnesses students were expelled for their refusal to sing the national anthem in school. The country did not address the concerns of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) about restrictions placed on freedom of conscience and religion of Jehovah's Witnesses related to ICCPR articles on nondiscrimination, freedom of religion, and rights of minorities in its response to the UNHRC Universal Periodic Review.

Unregistered religious groups received a significant degree of government scrutiny until they registered as an FBO under the law. Small religious congregations sometimes temporarily affiliated with larger registered organizations in order to operate.

Courts ruled in the cases of several Jehovah's Witnesses who were dismissed from government agencies since 2011 for refusing to touch the national flag while taking the public servant's oath. Jehovah's Witnesses reported 36 members losing employment for refusing to touch the national flag while taking the oath. Of the 23 Jehovah's Witnesses who took their cases to court on the grounds of alleged violations of their religious beliefs and illegal dismissal, five plaintiffs lost their cases in the High Court, eight plaintiffs lost their cases in the Supreme Court, one won the case, and nine cases were still pending in courts at year's end. Jehovah's Witnesses leadership reported difficulties in securing appointments with authorities to discuss a range of legal requirements imposing certain limitations on their religious practices and beliefs.

Both Christian and Muslim places of worship were affected by noise ordinance restrictions and were required to decrease the volume on their sound equipment.

Government officials presiding over wedding ceremonies generally required couples to take a pledge "in the name of God Almighty" while touching the national flag, a legal requirement. Jehovah's Witnesses stated this made it difficult to marry legally, since few officials were willing to perform the ceremony without the flag oath and Jehovah's Witnesses objected to the practice on religious grounds. For some Jehovah's Witnesses, placing their hands on a Bible on top of the flag was an acceptable alternative. Jehovah's Witnesses were not able to obtain a waiver and

reported difficulties in getting an appointment with relevant authorities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In December the Rwanda Football Federation (FERWAFA) banned the practice of witchcraft during soccer games. Players found guilty of practicing witchcraft faced a three-match ban and a fine of 100,000 Rwandan Franc (\$123), although there were no cases of the penalty being enforced at year's end. According to the FERWAFA vice president, FERWAFA decided to enact the new ban because of "the violence between players because of allegations that one team is using [witchcraft]."

Seventh-day Adventist students attending Catholic-affiliated government-subsidized schools regularly faced the risk of suspension and expulsion for missing classes scheduled on their Saturday Sabbath. According to Church leaders, this ongoing issue for Seventh-day Adventist students was generally resolved at the school district level after a conference between parent associations and school officials. Seventh-day Adventists also ran their own schools at all levels across the country to avoid continued problems with Catholic-affiliated schools.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported Catholic schools, both government-subsidized and private, required all students to attend Mass regardless of their personal faith. Christian leaders reported Muslim schools required all female students to wear headscarves in class as well as outside schools until they reached their homes.

Religious leaders, particularly the Grand Mufti of Rwanda, reported numerous religious groups and associations contributed to greater religious understanding and tolerance by participating in interfaith meetings and collaborating on community development projects, such as providing assistance to HIV/AIDS patients and supporting government development initiatives. Jehovah's Witnesses reportedly do not attend interfaith meetings.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives engaged with government officials, including staff responsible for FBO and NGO registration, and urged the government to simplify the process and increase transparency. In these meetings, the government expressed a commitment to religious freedom and tolerance.

The U.S. embassy hosted interfaith discussions focused on religious diversity and included members of different religious groups in numerous public outreach programs it conducted in Kigali and throughout the country. In June the U.S. Ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar, which was attended by more than 60 guests, including the Grand Mufti of Rwanda, the secretary general of the Catholic Bishops Conference, the head of the Evangelical Restoration Church, a representative from the Pentecostal Church, the Anglican deputy to the archbishop, as well as 12 RMC members. In her remarks, the Ambassador focused on the opportunity Ramadan presented for sparking interfaith dialogue.

The embassy underscored the value of religious diversity and inclusion at key community events, including during the genocide commemoration, which featured interfaith prayers, and at the embassy's Independence Day celebration.

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