

RWANDA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of religion and worship. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses annual report, the government continued to impose restrictions on Jehovah's Witnesses because of their refusal for religious reasons to participate in certain government-mandated activities, such as community night patrols that required carrying batons and performing work similar to the police. Eight Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested and held for periods ranging from two to nine days before being released without charge. One was reportedly severely beaten. According to some religious leaders, the government at times interfered in the affairs of religious organizations when their activities were deemed to pose a political or security challenge to the state. Senior religious leaders were often asked to join the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) party, and at times encouraged congregants to support government policy. Religious groups reported they were required to fulfill often onerous and lengthy registration requirements and to obtain government permission to hold some public meetings.

Seventh-day Adventist students attending Catholic-affiliated schools regularly faced the risk of suspension and expulsion for missing classes scheduled on their Sabbath. Religious leaders reported that numerous religious groups and associations contributed to greater religious 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 and interfaith roundtables where religious freedom and tolerance were among the key messages. To promote religious diversity and tolerance, the embassy regularly included members of different religious groups in numerous public outreach programs it conducted in Kigali.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12.6 million (July 2015 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

RWANDA

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 Rwandan Muslim Association stated Muslims might be undercounted, and might constitute 10 percent of the population.

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 one million Rwandan francs (\$135 to \$1,347).

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 religious-based organization 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.

The law that covers religious groups does not cover nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) associated with religious groups. Domestic NGOs associated with religious groups are required to register with the RGB, but under a

RWANDA

different law governing NGOs. The law details a multi-step 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 to take an oath of loyalty “in the name of God almighty.” Touching the flag while reciting the oath is mandated by law. 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 one million Rwandan francs (\$27 to \$1,347) 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 five million Rwandan francs (\$135 to \$6,735) and imprisonment of eight days to three years for unauthorized public meetings. Competent authorities are required to respond within 15 days to requests by religious-based organizations to hold special meetings in public.

For night meetings, including religious meetings, local authorities often require advance notification, particularly for ceremonies involving amplified music and boisterous celebrations. Laws prohibit excessive noise that disrupts neighborhoods and undermines property values and impose fines for violations ranging from 10,000 to 100,000 Rwandan francs (\$13 to \$135). Nighttime noise disturbances can be punished by imprisonment of eight days to two months and/or a fine of 50,000 to one million Rwandan francs (\$67 to \$1,347). Religious organizations are required to conform to laws protecting public security, public health, good morals, and human rights.

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.

RWANDA

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 (\$135).

Government Practices

There were reports of arrests, a beating in custody, police interference in some religious gatherings, and sometimes burdensome delays in registration. Compulsory service in night patrols and required pledges while holding the national flag applied to all citizens, including Jehovah's Witnesses, despite their religious objections.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported local officials at times retaliated against members who refused to sing the national anthem in school or to participate in community night patrols and government-sponsored "solidarity" civil and military training. There were eight cases of Jehovah's Witnesses arrested for refusing on religious grounds to participate in community night patrols that required carrying batons and performing work similar to the police. Police held the detainees for periods ranging from two to nine days before releasing them without charge. Reportedly one detainee was severely beaten. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses annual report, another Jehovah's Witness was detained for three days for refusal to contribute money for the release of a military officer detained in another country on war crimes. The authorities reportedly closed three businesses owned by Jehovah's Witness for 17 days for refusal to pay night patrol fees.

A group of pastors arrested in 2014 after breaking away from The Pentecostal Church of Rwanda (ADEPR) to establish the Pentecostal Church of Emmanuel (PEMR) reportedly continued to encounter government interference in the establishment and operation of the church. Police in Rulindo and Nyamagabe districts interrupted PEMR church services and refused to allow the group to meet, saying it was not registered.

RWANDA

The government granted official recognition to some religious groups during the year, but the number was unknown as the government did not issue an official list of groups approved or denied. The EPEMR continued facing delays in registering, and had not been able to do so by year's end.

Unregistered religious groups were allowed to congregate after informing local authorities and could be granted a temporary registration certificate while the legal application process, which might last well over a year, was ongoing. Unregistered religious groups were not allowed to proselytize, were subject to different visa requirements, and received a significant degree of government scrutiny until they registered as religious-based organizations under the law. Small religious congregations sometimes temporarily affiliated with larger registered organizations in order to operate.

There were reports the government continued to interfere with the internal operations of some religious organizations. The ADEPR executive committee, which was appointed during the year after a lengthy government intervention in the church's leadership selection, faced criticism by church members for close ties with the ruling RPF party. Church leaders and administrators reportedly faced pressure and threats over joining the RPF and pledging allegiance to the party.

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. Seven Jehovah's Witnesses were dismissed from work during the year, and a total of 32 were dismissed since 2011. Of the 21 Jehovah's Witnesses who took their cases to court on the grounds of alleged violations of their religious beliefs and illegal dismissal, 11 plaintiffs lost their cases and did not appeal and two lost their cases and were awaiting appeals. The remaining eight won their lawsuits in the High Court, but the government was appealing to the Supreme Court. Eleven dismissed Jehovah's Witnesses did not file lawsuits. At year's end, the government had not rehired any of the fired workers or paid them compensation.

There were no reports of religious personnel arrested due to violations of restrictions on noise disturbances as occurred in 2014. Both Christian and Muslim places of worship, however, were similarly affected by noise ordinance restrictions and were required to decrease the volume on their sound equipment.

RWANDA

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.

A July 5 Presidential order stated, “Any government-subsidized school should give its students their right to worship and facilitate them to worship according to their beliefs, as long as their religions are legally accepted in the country and if this does not interfere with learning and teaching activities.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Seventh-day Adventist students attending Catholic-affiliated public schools regularly faced the risk of suspension and expulsion for missing classes scheduled on their Sabbath, which is on Saturdays. 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.

Religious leaders reported that 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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives engaged with government officials to discuss religious freedom and tolerance, including government practices that interfered with the practice of religion. In these meetings, the government expressed a commitment to religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy also met with religious leaders. To promote diversity and tolerance, the embassy regularly included members of different religious groups in numerous public outreach programs it conducted in Kigali, and hosted interfaith discussions focused on

RWANDA

religious diversity. The Ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar, which was attended by more than 100 guests, including a number of religious leaders. In her remarks, the Ambassador focused on opening a dialogue on religious issues affecting the religious communities. She further stressed the need to protect the right of all peoples to peacefully practice and celebrate their faith.

In addition to hosting a September religious freedom roundtable with representatives from different faiths, 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.