

# **RWANDA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of religion and worship. In contrast with the previous year, there were no reported arrests or shootings of Muslims or Muslim leaders, and Muslim community leaders reported effective collaboration with police and local authorities. Compulsory service in night patrols and reciting the pledge of allegiance to the nation while holding the national flag during certain civil ceremonies continued to be required of all citizens, including Jehovah's Witnesses, despite their religious objections. Five Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested after refusing to serve in night patrols and pay security fees, and 24 Jehovah's Witnesses teachers were threatened with dismissal for objecting to hold the national flag while taking their oath.

Local media reported two attacks on members of a Pentecostal church in the Huye District of Southern Province. One day after six church members were attacked and severely beaten (leaving one in a coma as a result), an armed mob attacked the church at night, injuring 25 church members. 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 on their way to and from 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, launching an interfaith religious leaders forum, 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 11.9 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2012 census, the population is 44 percent Roman Catholic; 38 percent Protestant denominations, including Anglican, Pentecostal, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, and "born-again" churches; 12 percent Seventh-day Adventist; 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 one million Rwandan francs (\$120 to \$1,200).

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 RGB chief executive; 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 and 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 that approved the statutes of the organization; and an action plan for the fiscal year. The law allows FBOs to operate with an endorsement letter from district authorities pending final registration by the RGB.

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. Those who do not fulfill the requirement forfeit their position. 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 (\$24 to \$1,200) 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 (\$120 to \$5,800) and imprisonment of eight days to three years for unauthorized public meetings. District mayors are required to respond within 15 days to FBO requests to hold special meetings in public. FBOs are not required to seek authorization for routine meetings.

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 disrupts neighborhoods and undermines property values, and impose fines for violations ranging from 10,000 to 100,000 Rwandan francs (\$12 to \$120). Nighttime noise disturbances may be punished by imprisonment of eight days to two months and/or a fine of 50,000 to one million Rwandan francs (\$58 to \$1,200). 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 may be granted a temporary registration certificate while the legal application process, which might last well over a year, is pending.

All students in public primary school and the first three years of secondary education must take a religion class that discusses various religions. The Ministry of Education establishes the curriculum. 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 religious groups. 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 (\$117).

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

### **Government Practices**

During the year, police arrested five Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to participate in night patrols or pay security fees. All were released after detention ranging from several hours to two days. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to report local officials' retaliation against members who refused to sing the national anthem in school, take an oath while holding the national flag, or participate in community night patrols and government-sponsored "solidarity" civil and military training. Between January and October, 67 Jehovah's Witnesses students were punished, including dismissal from school, for not attending religious services at school or not participating in military and patriotic activities at school. Jehovah's Witnesses schoolteachers were threatened with dismissal for objecting to holding the national flag while taking an oath. These included 18 teachers in Ngororero District 4, four teachers in Huye District, Maraba Sector, and two teachers in Karongi District. Jehovah's Witnesses also reported that the government applied the law on the oath

of loyalty retroactively, at times dismissing from office civil servants who had begun service before 2011, when the requirement was codified.

In contrast with the previous year, there were no reported arrests or shootings of Muslims or Muslim leaders. The Muslim community leadership reported working collaboratively with the Rwanda National Police (RNP) in combating extremism and radicalization in the Muslim community. The trial of approximately 40 Muslim individuals arrested in 2016 and accused of being associated with al-Shabaab, ISIS, and other terrorist organizations remained in progress at year's end.

Unregistered religious groups received a significant degree of government scrutiny of their leadership, activities, and registration application until they obtained FBO registration under the law. Small religious congregations sometimes temporarily affiliated with larger registered organizations in order to operate.

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to pursue judicial remedies for civil servants, including more than 200 teachers dismissed since 2011 for refusing to swear an oath on the flag. Of the 36 Jehovah's Witnesses who took their cases to court on the grounds of alleged violations of their religious beliefs and illegal dismissal, only one case was decided in favor of the plaintiff, and the decision hinged on technical rather than substantive grounds. Three cases remained pending before the High Court, and Jehovah's Witnesses appealed 16 cases to the Supreme Court during the year. Jehovah's Witnesses leadership also 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. There were no reports of religious organizations being cited under the ordinance during the year.

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; 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. Of the approximately 800 Jehovah's Witnesses who were reportedly refused

marriage registration, 760 reported “having to apply workarounds” (i.e. bribes) in order to obtain marriage licenses.

On April 11, a district authority in Rwamagana denied Jehovah’s Witnesses permission to hold a memorial commemorating Jesus’s death and sent security agents to prevent the memorial from being held. The memorial coincided with the week of commemoration of the Rwandan genocide. On April 9, the Mayor of Rwamagana told the Jehovah’s Witnesses that the event could be held if he could address the audience. The national office of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Rwanda wrote to the mayor to explain that this would interfere with their freedom of religion.

In May the RNP arrested four senior leaders of the Association of Pentecostal Churches of Rwanda on embezzlement charges, a prosecution that some church members said they believed was politically motivated. According to observers, the Pentecostal Church maintained a complicated relationship with the government, with some branches very close to the government, while others are more critical. Some congregations reported government interference in church operations.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

In February local media reported two attacks on members of a Pentecostal church in the Huye District of Southern Province. One day after six church members were attacked and severely beaten (leaving one in a coma as a result), an armed mob attacked the church at night, injuring 25 church members. Local authorities conducted community outreach and reportedly launched an investigation into the attack, but no arrests were reported by year’s end.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported Catholic schools, both government-subsidized and not, 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 on their way to and from schools until they reached their homes, regardless of their personal faith.

Religious leaders 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. During the year, a retired Anglican bishop who heads the Rwanda National Reconciliation Commission launched the Rwanda Religious Leaders Forum. The organization, under the joint leadership of the Grand Mufti of Rwanda

and Protestant, Catholic, Anglican, and evangelical Christian leaders, stated its aim was to strengthen interfaith collaboration on education, combating gender-based violence, socioeconomic development, and unity and reconciliation. Jehovah's Witnesses did not attend interfaith meetings and did not join the interfaith forum.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

U.S. embassy representatives engaged with government officials, including RGB staff responsible for FBO and NGO registration, and urged the government to simplify the process and increase transparency. U.S. embassy representatives raised the concerns of Jehovah's Witnesses with senior government officials and shared best practices on religious accommodations.

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 May the Ambassador visited the Islamic secondary school in Murambi with the Grand Mufti of Rwanda. In her remarks, the Ambassador emphasized the importance of interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and education in developing future leaders. In June the Ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar, which was attended by more than 75 guests, including the Deputy 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 25 RMC members. In her remarks, the Ambassador emphasized the importance of the faith communities' commitment to uphold the richness of religious diversity and defend the rights of all of their fellow citizens. The Ambassador and embassy officers also engaged religious leaders through the Rwanda Religious Leaders Forum.

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.