



## Zimbabwe

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to generally free practice of religion.

The Government criticized, harassed, and intimidated religious leaders who were critical of government policies or who spoke out against human rights abuses committed by the Government. Church leaders and members who criticized the Government faced arrest, temporary detention, and, in the case of foreigners, possible deportation.

Divisions between mainstream Christian religious groups and practitioners of indigenous religions continued. An interfaith council continued to work towards creating closer ties between different religious groups.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government, religious groups, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 150,760 square miles and a population of 11.6 million. It is estimated that between 70 and 80 percent of the population belong to mainstream Christian denominations such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist Churches; however, over the years a variety of indigenous churches and groups have emerged from these mainstream denominations. While the country is overwhelmingly Christian, the majority of the population believes, to varying degrees, in indigenous religions as well. Religious leaders reported an increase in adherence to traditional religion and healers.

Muslims account for 1 percent of the population, primarily in rural areas where Muslim-led humanitarian efforts are often organized. The remainder of the population includes practitioners of Greek Orthodoxy, Judaism, and traditional indigenous religions. There are also small numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, and Baha'is.

While political elites tend to be associated with one of the established Christian churches, there is no correlation between membership in any religious group and political or ethnic affiliation.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution protects the right of individuals to choose and change their religion as well as to privately or publicly manifest and propagate their religion through worship, teaching, practice, and observance.

Easter and Christmas are national holidays. There were no reports of non-Christians experiencing discrimination when celebrating other religious holidays.

A July 2006 amendment to the Witchcraft Suppression Act (WSA) criminalizes any practice "commonly associated with witchcraft," but only if that practice is intended to cause harm. Spoken words alone are not considered a witchcraft practice or evidence of illegal activity. The amendment also criminalizes witch hunts, imposes criminal penalties for falsely accusing others of witchcraft, and rejects killing of a witch as a defense for murder. Attacks on individuals in witchcraft related cases appear to be prosecuted under laws for assault, murder, or other crimes. At the end of the reporting period, there were no new or outstanding cases under the witchcraft law.

The Government does not require religious groups to be registered; however, religious organizations that operate schools or medical facilities are required to register those specific institutions with the appropriate ministry regulating their activities. Religious institutions are allowed to apply for tax-exempt status and duty-free privileges with the Customs Department. These requests were generally granted.

Curriculums at public primary and secondary schools are set by the Ministry of Education. Many public secondary schools include a religious education course that focuses on Christian religious groups and covers other religions, emphasizing the need for religious tolerance. Most public universities offer degrees in religious education that primarily focus on Christian doctrine.

The country has a long history of Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist primary and secondary schools. The Government does not regulate religious education in private schools. Since independence there has been a proliferation of evangelical basic education schools. Christian schools, the majority of which are Catholic, constitute one-third of all schools. Islamic, Hindu, and Hebrew primary and secondary schools are also found in major urban areas such as Harare and Bulawayo.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

Religious groups continued to be challenged by the Government's restrictive laws regarding freedoms of assembly, expression, and association. Although not specifically aimed at religious activities, the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) continued to be used to interfere with religious and civil society groups organizing public prayer rallies. Although POSA exempts religious activities and events, the Government generally views any public gathering that is critical of the regime as political even if the nature of the event is religious.

The Government viewed with suspicion missionaries it considered politically motivated. Some missionary organizations occasionally experienced delays implementing humanitarian relief activities and in having their work permits issued.

#### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

The Government showed favoritism to a breakaway faction of the Anglican Church loyal to the ruling party, allowing police to harass and arrest clergy and parishioners of opposing congregations.

In April and May 2008, police stormed various Anglican churches, breaking up services and attacking worshippers, mostly women, with batons. Police violence against citizens during April and May also included arresting parishioners, interrogating priests and lay leaders, and locking doors of churches to keep worshippers away.

In December 2007 after the CPCA appointed Reverend Sebastian Bakare as acting bishop of Harare, police reportedly disseminated leaflets advising congregations that only clergy loyal to Kunonga were authorized to hold services in the diocese's churches. On January 13, 2008, police forcibly disrupted church services at three Anglican churches in Harare and arrested three priests and more than a dozen parishioners opposed to Kunonga for holding services on church property without permission. They were later released without charge. On January 19, 2008, a high court judge issued an interim order compelling the two factions to share church properties and worship at different times. Police and Kunonga supporters continued to prevent Bakare from conducting services in several churches and to harass opponents of the deposed bishop. A final court decision granting control over church assets was pending at the end of the reporting period.

In September 2007 Reverend Nolbert Kunonga, the Anglican bishop of Harare and an ardent supporter of

President Robert Mugabe and the ruling party, attempted to unilaterally separate the diocese of Harare from its regional body, the Church Province of Central Africa (CPCA), ostensibly because he opposed the province's stance on homosexuality. Kunonga refused to relinquish control of church assets, including property and financial accounts, and prevented congregations that did not recognize his authority from worshipping in their churches. The CPCA responded by removing Kunonga as bishop and sought a court order to seize control of church assets.

On August 18, 2007, police arrested 15 Christian church leaders, including Bishop Samuel Pasula, Reverend Gordon Chinogurei, and Reverend Patrick Tole, for attending an allegedly unsanctioned meeting. The church leaders contended that the event was a prayer meeting and thus exempt from POSA requirements. Police released the group that same day after they paid a fine. Several members of the group were arrested again on August 20 and held for 4 days before being released without charge.

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Practitioners of indigenous religions, including traditional healers, experienced improved relations with the Government. The Government was more inclusive of indigenous religions, of which it has traditionally been suspicious, and tolerant of witchcraft practices, which it had previously attempted to restrict. Unlike in previous reporting periods, President Mugabe made no negative statements about evangelical or indigenous churches, and he also met with leaders from these groups.

### **Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

The Muslim community believed isolated incidents of discrimination against Muslims occurred, although none were reported.

There were continuing reports of tensions between traditional indigenous religions and mainstream Christian churches. Some indigenous churches' acceptance of polygamy and rejection of modern medicine were common sources of tension. One leader of a traditional religious group reported that he believed that traditional religious leaders were not always consulted or taken seriously by the mainstream religious groups, especially in terms of addressing the country's problems. However, religious leaders from a wide spectrum of churches and groups continued to discuss these matters productively in meetings of the interfaith council and suggested possible areas of cooperation, such as combating HIV/AIDS.

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

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government, religious groups, and NGOs as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy widely disseminated relevant reports on religious rights and sponsored a lecture series by a prominent American civil rights activist who addressed diverse religious and civil society groups about the role of faith-based communities in social change. U.S. officials privately and publicly emphasized concern regarding intimidation and harassment of religious officials who criticized the Government.

Released on September 19, 2008

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