



Zimbabwe

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

While the Government has historically had good relations with religious groups, it continued to criticize, harass, and intimidate religious leaders who were critical of government policies or who spoke out against human rights abuses committed by the Government. Unlike in previous years, there were no reported instances of violence against religious leaders who were critical of government policies; however, 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 formed in 2004 continued to work towards creating closer ties between different religious groups.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government 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 12.3 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. Evangelical denominations, primarily Pentecostal churches and apostolic groups, were the fastest growing group during the reporting period.

While the country is overwhelmingly Christian, the majority of the population continues to believe, to varying degrees, in indigenous religions as well. Religious leaders also reported an increase in adherence to traditional religion and healers.

Islam accounts for 1 percent of the population and also continued to grow, particularly 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, Baha'is, and atheists.

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.

Foreign missionary groups are present in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full, and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There is no state religion, and the Government showed no favoritism to any group based on religious affiliation, although the majority of political elites adhered to mainstream Christian denominations.

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

In July 2006 an amendment to the previously criticized Witchcraft Suppression Act (WSA) took effect that criminalizes any practice "commonly associated with witchcraft" only if that practice is intended to cause harm. Under this new framework, spoken words alone are no longer 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. At the end of the reporting period, there were no new or outstanding cases under the witchcraft law. Attacks on individuals in witchcraft related cases appear to be prosecuted under laws for assault, murder, or other crimes.

Proponents of the WSA amendment applauded it for recognizing certain elements of witchcraft as part of traditional culture and regarded it as a positive step in recognizing indigenous religions. Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA), for example, welcomed the amendment for differentiating negative witchcraft from traditional beliefs and enabling traditional healers to operate more openly, without fear of either witch hunters or prosecution.

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. Private schools, many of which are church-run, also follow the government-set curricula but are allowed to include religious instruction as well. In public institutions of higher education, they are set by curriculum boards that usually include Ministry of Education officials. Many public secondary schools include a religious education course that focuses on Christian religious groups but covers other religions and emphasizes 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 permits, and does not regulate, religious education in these 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 the schools in the country. Islamic, Hindu, and Hebrew primary and secondary schools are also found in the major urban areas such as Harare and Bulawayo. Additionally, several private institutions of higher education include religious studies as a core component of the curriculum.

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/ events, the Government generally views any public gatherings that are critical of the regime as political even if the nature of the event is religious.

Although there are no official statistics on the prevalence of foreign missionaries in the country, missionaries are known to operate in the country. Most often, these missionaries run schools, hospitals, and humanitarian aid organizations. The Government views with suspicion those missionaries it considers politically motivated. Missions generally operated without government interference, although they occasionally experienced delays implementing some humanitarian relief activities and in having their work permits issued.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Unlike in the previous years, there were no reports that the Government forced congregants to dismantle their places of worship. During the reporting period, there were no updates to any previously reported cases involving the destruction of places of worship and charities run by religious organizations as part of the government-ordered Operation Restore Order campaign in 2005. Operation Restore Order mandated the destruction of "illegal structures."

There were no further developments in the cases involving members of WOZA who were detained during a prayer vigil in April 2005 while awaiting election results. Additionally, no investigation into the burning of a church building by supporters of a ruling party parliamentary candidate in March 2005 was begun.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor United States 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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Divisions between mainstream Christian religious groups and practitioners of traditional religions continued. Unlike in previous years, there were no reported cases of discrimination against Muslims in private work places, although the religious community believed isolated incidents of this type continued to occur. The Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Baha'i, and Buddhist religious communities were relatively small and generally were not in open competition with Christian denominations for converts.

At least five umbrella religious organizations continued to operate during the reporting period. These groups included: the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC); the Heads of Denominations, an association of Christian denominations created to facilitate collaboration among Christian groups and the Government in the operation of religious schools and hospitals; Fambidzano, a group of indigenous churches; ZINATHA, an organization that represents traditional healers; and the Islamic Council, an umbrella organization for Muslim groups in the country.

There were continuing reports of tensions between traditional indigenous religions and mainstream Christian churches. Some indigenous churches' acceptance of polygamy and avoidance 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 HIV/AIDS.

Reports of possible ritual killings and mutilations continued to be cited by newspapers and women and children's rights groups throughout the reporting period. Police usually inquired into these killings; however, limited resources prevented police from conducting many investigations or identifying perpetrators.

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 years, President Mugabe made no negative statements about evangelical or indigenous churches, and he also met with leaders from these groups.

In July 2006 an amendment to the previously criticized WSA took effect that identifies witchcraft practices as those "commonly associated with witchcraft" and criminalizes those practices only if intended to cause harm. Under this new framework, spoken words alone are no longer 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. At the end of the reporting period, there were no new or outstanding cases under the witchcraft law.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy widely disseminated relevant reports on religious rights and hosted an event that promoted religious pluralism. U.S. Government officials privately and publicly emphasized concern regarding intimidation and harassment of religious officials who criticized the Government.

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