International Religious Freedom Report 2006
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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 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 the majority of religious groups (primarily Christian), 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.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. An interfaith council, formed in 2004, continued to work towards creating closer ties between different religious groups.

The U.S. government expressed its position on religious freedom through its publication and dissemination of various human rights documents, including the annual reports on International Religious Freedom, the Human Rights Report and various other statements. It continued to condemn the Government's generally poor human rights record and expressed its position on religious freedom publicly.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 150,760 square miles and a population of approximately 12.2 million. It is estimated that between 70 and 80 percent of the population belonged to the mainstream Christian denominations such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist churches; however, over the years a variety of local churches and groups have emerged from these mainstream denominations. Evangelical denominations, primarily Pentecostal churches and apostolic groups, were the fastest growing during the reporting period.

While the country is overwhelmingly Christian, the majority of persons continued to believe, to varying degrees, in traditional indigenous religions as well. For example, individuals may have worshiped in a westernized Christian church but also consulted with traditional healers.

Traditional healers were very common in both rural and urban areas. They are licensed and regulated by the Zimbabwe National African Traditional Healers' Association (ZINATHA), which has approximately 55,000 members. ZINATHA officials estimated that 80 percent of the population consulted traditional healers during the year. Religious leaders also reported an increase in adherence to traditional religion and healers as the economic situation worsened in the country.

Islam accounted for 1 percent of the population and also continued to see growth, particularly in rural areas where Muslim-led humanitarian efforts were often organized. The remainder of the population included practitioners of Greek Orthodoxy, Judaism, and traditional indigenous religions. There were also a small number of Hindus, Buddhists, Baha'is, and atheists.

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

Although there were no official statistics on the prevalence of foreign missionaries in the country, Christian and Muslim missionaries from other parts of Africa, Europe, Asia, and the United States were generally known to operate in the country. Most often, these missionaries ran schools, hospitals, and humanitarian aid organizations. As with humanitarian groups in general, some missionaries were considered by the Government as being potentially political and, consequently, viewed with some suspicion. Missions generally operated without government interference, although they occasionally experienced delays in having their work permits issued.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right.
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. Generally, the practice of a particular faith was not known to confer any advantage or disadvantage in the political arena, the civil service, the military, or the private sector.

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

Unlike in previous years, the Government recognized all religious groups and reached out more to religious leaders, including indigenous ones which it had previously excluded. For example, President Mugabe and other government officials met with indigenous religious leaders throughout the reporting period and included these leaders in the planning for a 2006 National Day of Prayer.

The Government also appeared to be more inclusive of indigenous religions, of which it has traditionally been suspicious, and tolerant of supposed 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 April 2006 President Mugabe signed an amendment to the previously criticized Witchcraft Suppression Act (WSA). The amendment, which was to take effect on July 1, 2006, 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 would no longer be considered a witchcraft practice or evidence of illegal activity. The amendment would also criminalize witch hunts, impose criminal penalties for falsely accusing others of witchcraft, and reject killing of a witch as a defense for murder.

Proponents of the WSA amendment applauded it for recognizing certain elements of witchcraft as a part of traditional culture and regarded it as a positive step in recognizing indigenous religions. 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. ZINATHA also stated that the amendment would facilitate the prosecution of unlicensed traditional healers.

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

Curricula at public primary and secondary schools are set by the Ministry of Education. In public institutions of higher education, they are set by curriculum boards that usually include Ministry of Education officials. Many public secondary schools also included a religious education course that focuses on Christian religions but also covers other religions and emphasizes the need for religious tolerance. Most public universities included degrees in religious education which primarily focus on Christian doctrine.

The country has a long history of Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist primary and secondary schools. The Government permitted, and did 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 were also found in the major urban areas such as Harare and Bulawayo. Additionally, several private institutions of higher education included religious studies as a core component of the curriculum.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government maintained a monopoly on television broadcasting through the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC). As in recent years, the Government permitted limited religious radio and television broadcasting on ZBC and advertising in the Government-controlled press by all, rather than selected religious groups. The Government generally followed the recommendations of the Religious Advisory Board, an umbrella group of Christian denominations, on appropriate religious material to broadcast. Although only Christian groups were represented on this board, religious programming, which included statements by religious leaders, radio broadcasts of prayers, and a regular television show about religion, was representative of non-Christian groups and was not exclusive in this regard. The television show “Traditional Voices,” for example, included a religious program aimed at Muslims. It was directed by a local Muslim leader, who was invited by the Government to put on the program twice a month.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

During the period covered by this report, church leaders and members who criticized the Government continued to face intimidation, arrest, and detention by government officials. President Mugabe made speeches denouncing church leaders who purportedly "support the opposition" and frequently called on these leaders to avoid political activity. Church leaders who participated in demonstrations or public events criticizing the Government sometimes faced harassment and temporary detention under the Public Order and Security Act. Under this act police notification is required to hold public gatherings.

On June 25, 2006, President Mugabe spoke for the first time at the annual National Day of Prayer ceremonies. The ceremony was reportedly rescheduled twice to allow Mugabe to attend. Buses from the state-owned bus company transported individuals from gathering spots where ruling party supporters often congregated to the ceremonies. The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), which has publicly criticized the regime's human rights abuses and organized past National Days of Prayer, cooperated with the Government in planning the event. The ZCC reported that Mugabe was reaching out more to religious groups. The Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, which has also been critical of the Government, also participated in the organization of the 2006 event. In contrast to these collaborations, the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance (ZCA) criticized the Government for taking over the event and other church groups for collaborating. Despite official government support, turnout for the event was poor.
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 groups organizing public prayers. In May 2006, for example, the ZCA planned a prayer procession in the city of Bulawayo to commemorate the anniversary of the Government's 2005 "Operation Restore Order." The group applied for and received police clearance for the march; however, police revoked the clearance days before the march was to take place. The group held the march, as originally scheduled, on May 20 after successfully challenging the police in court. Police directed the marchers down a different, less populated route than the one planned but otherwise did not interfere. There were no reports that police disturbed any of the other commemoration events planned at churches. According to the ZCA, other religious and secular nongovernmental organizations cancelled or postponed their commemorations of Operation Restore Order under "official pressure." In 2004 POSA was also used to detain nine women belonging to WOZA on charges of "praying in public," an act that allegedly violated Section 19 of the act. According to Amnesty International, some of the women were assaulted during their interrogations; all were eventually released in October of that year.

Operation Restore Order mandated the destruction of purportedly illegal structures. During the reporting period, some places of worship and charities run by religious organizations continued to be destroyed. On July 26, 2005, for example, police destroyed a church and a mosque at the high-density settlement of Porta Farm. In late June, news sources also reported that two church buildings belonging to the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (Zaoga) in Chitungwiza were demolished in late June 2005 for the alleged illegal occupation of land. Several church leaders, particularly Zimbabwean Catholic bishops, criticized the Government's actions. There were no updates to any of these or other cases involving the destruction of places of worship covered in the previous reporting period.

The Government also limited religious groups’ activities when it attempted to block efforts by religious and humanitarian organizations that provided relief to the victims of Operation Restore Order. In July 2005, for example, police raided churches in Bulawayo and forcibly removed displaced persons who were taking shelter at the churches. On July 20 of that same year, police detained three clergymen when they went to a police station to inquire about the forced removals. Police arrested a fourth clergyman the same day while he was filming forced removals. Police released all four men without charges the next day. One of the clergymen, Reverend Ray Moti, claimed that the arrests had been retribution against the churches for assisting victims. The Zimbabwean National Pastor's Conference (ZNPC) released a statement three days later criticizing the Government's actions during the operations and harassment of church groups attempting to provide humanitarian assistance to the victims.

During the period covered by this report, there were no further developments in the cases involving members of Women of Zimbabwe Arise! 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. Rev. Noel Scott, who went to trial in November 2004 for holding a street prayer in 2002, was no longer in detention. The magistrate responsible for the case failed to issue a judgment scheduled for January 2006, and further action appeared unlikely.

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

The generally amicable relations among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom, although divisions between mainstream Christian religions and practitioners of traditional religions continued. Unlike in previous years, there were no reported cases of discrimination against Muslims in private work places, although embassy contacts in 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.

The interfaith council formed in 2004 continued to work towards bringing together practitioners of various faiths and establishing points of collaboration.

At least five umbrella religious organizations continued to operate during the reporting period. These groups included: The ZCC, the Heads of Denominations, an association of Christian denominations created to enable 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.

The ZCC served as the umbrella organization of all Protestant ecumenical Christian missionary churches, except for evangelical organizations. A total of seventy-two evangelical churches applied for membership to the Council during the previous reporting period; however, the ZCC turned down all the applications because the applicant churches allow polygamy.

While practitioners of traditional indigenous religions experienced improved relations with the Government, there were continuing reports of tensions between these groups and mainstream Christian churches. Some indigenous churches' acceptance of polygamy and avoidance of modern medicine were common sources of these tensions. In addition, some Christian church leaders' opposition to the previously mentioned WSA amendment also strained relations between the two communities. Leaders discussed these issues productively in meetings of the interfaith council and suggested possible areas of cooperation, such as HIV/AIDS; notably, however, the head of the Apostolic church renounced polygamy— a practice it previously considered to be legitimate.
Reports of possible ritual killings and mutilations continued to be cited by newspapers and women and children's rights groups throughout the period covered by this report. Police usually investigated these killings; however, limited resources prevented police from conducting many investigations or identifying perpetrators.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government had regular dialogue with and supported civil society organizations that advocated and monitored respect for human rights, including freedom of religion.

In support of religious freedom, the U.S. embassy widely disseminated relevant reports on religious rights, and U.S. government officials privately and publicly emphasized concern regarding intimidation and harassment of religious officials who criticized the Government. The embassy supported efforts by religious leaders to highlight the Government's human rights abuses and flawed economic policies. It also encouraged these leaders' attempts to initiate and sustain a dialogue with government officials on approaches to improving the political situation.

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