

RWANDA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of religion and worship. The government temporarily detained a group of pastors for holding a meeting to establish a breakaway group from a church whose leadership was believed to have close ties with the ruling political party, and interfered with some religious organizations through removal and appointment of their leadership. The government continued to impose restrictions on Jehovah's Witnesses because of their refusal for religious reasons to participate in certain government-mandated activities. Religious groups were required to fulfill often onerous and lengthy registration requirements and to obtain government permission to hold public meetings.

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 government officials and religious leaders on religious freedom. To promote 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 12.3 million (July 2014 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 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. Some 2.5 percent holds no religious beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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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. The constitution also 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 (\$145 to \$1,450).

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 traditional but not mandated by law.

The law establishes fines of 20,000 to one million Rwandan francs (\$29 to \$1,450) 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.

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 representatives, his/her deputy, their duties, full address, curriculum 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 Original District Collaboration Letter, issued by the mayor.

The law covers religious groups, but not nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) associated with religious groups. Domestic NGOs associated with religious groups are also required to register with the RGB, but under a different law governing NGOs. The law imposes, and government policy exacerbates, burdensome registration requirements, as well as time consuming requirements for annual financial and activity reports and action plans.

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Unregistered religious groups may congregate after informing local authorities and may be granted a temporary registration certificate while the legal application process, which may last well over a year, is ongoing. Unregistered religious groups may not proselytize, are subject to different visa requirements, and receive a significant degree of government scrutiny until they register as religious-based organizations under the law. In practice, small religious congregations sometimes affiliate with larger registered organizations in order to operate temporarily.

The law regulates public meetings and establishes fines of 100,000 to five million Rwandan francs (\$145 to \$7,250) and imprisonment of eight days to three years for unauthorized public meetings, including assemblies for religious reasons. 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 (\$15 to \$145). 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 (\$73 to \$1450). Religious organizations are required to conform to laws protecting public security, public health, good morals, and human rights.

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 (\$145).

All students in public primary school and the first three years of secondary education must take a religion class that discusses various religions. 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 religious-based organizations law prohibits religious groups from engaging in activities designed to achieve political power, defined as supporting political organizations or candidates for public office.

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Government Practices

On March 30, police arrested a small group of pastors who broke away from The Pentecostal Church of Rwanda (ADEPR) to establish the Pentecostal Church of Emmanuel (EPEMR). Police officials said they arrested the pastors for holding a meeting without obtaining the requisite prior permission. Police held the pastors for nine days before releasing them without charges. The EPEMR also reported difficulties registering, and had not been able to do so by year's end.

There were reports the government continued to interfere with the internal operations of religious organizations. The ADEPR executive committee, which was appointed after a lengthy government intervention in the church's leadership selection, faced criticism by church members for close ties with the ruling Rwanda Patriotic Front party. Others raised similar concerns about excessive government interference over the removal and selection of leadership within the Rwanda Muslim Association.

Local officials occasionally retaliated against Jehovah's Witnesses 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 three cases of Jehovah's Witnesses arrested for refusing on religious grounds to participate in community night patrols that required carrying batons. Police held the detainees for periods ranging from two to 10 days before releasing them without charge.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported two students in Gakenke and Karongi districts were suspended from public school for refusing to sing the national anthem on religious grounds. Two students in Kirehe, on February 17, and one student in Ngororero district, on February 12, were suspended for not attending Catholic Mass held at a public school with a strong Catholic presence. The students filed court cases and the school had reinstated all three by year's end. They did not receive compensation for the lost school time.

Courts ruled in the cases of several Jehovah's Witnesses who were dismissed from government agencies in 2011 for refusing to touch the national flag while taking the public servant's oath. All of the plaintiffs, 25 in total, alleged violations of their religious beliefs and illegal dismissal. Of the 18 who appealed lower court

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decisions, three lost their appeal, two were awaiting verdicts, and 13 were awaiting court dates. Of the remaining seven church members who had filed lawsuits, two cases were pending in intermediate court awaiting a hearing date, the high court decided against the plaintiffs in two others, and the last three never went to trial after the courts dismissed them. At year's end, the government had not rehired any of the fired workers or paid them compensation.

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 government practice but not a legal requirement. The practice made it difficult for Jehovah's Witnesses 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.

In November the Catholic-affiliated Groupe Scolaire St Joseph of Kabgayi expelled 14 Seventh-day Adventist students for missing exams scheduled on their Sabbath. At year's end, the case was being reviewed by the Ministry of Education and ombudsman's office. Seventh-day Adventists built their own schools at all levels across the country to avoid continued problems.

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. Among the groups registered was the Mormon Church.

Restrictions on noise disturbances led to the arrest of numerous pastors and the confiscation of church sound equipment during worship services. While non-religious businesses were also affected, some religious group members complained "born again" churches were disproportionately affected.

Government policy allowed individuals to express religious identity through headdress in photos for passports, driver's licenses, or other official documents.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Numerous religious groups and associations contributed to greater religious understanding and tolerance by participating in interfaith meetings and

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collaborating on community development projects, such as providing assistance to HIV/AIDS patients and supporting government development initiatives. The Interfaith Commission for Rwanda, co-chaired by the archbishop of the Catholic Church and the grand mufti of the Rwanda Muslim Association, supported programs aimed at reconciling genocide survivors, released prisoners who participated in the genocide, and families of detained genocide participants.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy representatives engaged with government officials and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. To promote diversity and tolerance, the embassy regularly included members of different religious groups in numerous public outreach programs it conducted in Kigali.