



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Rwanda

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. There were a small number of cases of local government officials reacting to belief-based actions of Jehovah's Witnesses.

There was an improvement in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and there were fewer reports of local authorities harassing and detaining members of Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to experience difficulty in obtaining permission to build Kingdom Halls (places of worship) in some localities, and there were some cases of detention and expulsion of children from school. Relations between the Government and the Roman Catholic Church continued to improve, and Muslims continued to enjoy greater freedom of worship than under the previous government.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy officers met regularly with religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 10,169 square miles and a population of approximately 8.3 million. A 2001 study conducted by a foreign university reported that 49.6 percent of the population was Roman Catholic, 43.9 percent Protestant, 4.6 percent Muslim, 1.7 claimed no religious affiliation, and 0.1 percent practiced traditional indigenous beliefs. This study indicated a 19.9 percent increase in the number of Protestants, a 7.6 percent drop in the number of Catholics, and a 3.5 percent increase in the number of Muslims from the 1996 U.N. Population Fund survey. The figures for Protestants include the growing number of members of Jehovah's Witnesses and evangelical Protestant groups. There also was a small population of Baha'is. There has been a proliferation of small, usually Christian-linked schismatic religious groups since the 1994 genocide.

Foreign missionaries and church-linked nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of various faiths operated in the country, including Trocaire, Catholic Relief Services, Lutheran World Federation, World Vision, World Relief, Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Norwegian Church Aid, Salvation Army, Direct Aid (formerly the African Muslim Agency), Jesuit Relief Society, Christian Aid, Christian Direct Outreach, Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, African Evangelical Enterprise, and Jesus Alive Ministries. Foreign missionaries openly promoted their religious beliefs, and the Government has welcomed their development assistance. There was no indication that religious belief is linked directly to membership in any political party.

An Australian Christian church-based initiative called Hope Rwanda involved approximately 500 volunteers visiting the country in the spring and summer of 2006. The initiative, planned to coincide with the one-hundred-day national period of mourning genocide victims, included humanitarian assistance and religious services and training. Hope Rwanda received strong support from the Government, including a speech by President Kagame during the opening ceremony.

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. There were fewer reports of local authorities restricting religious freedom. The constitution prohibits the formation of political organizations that are based on race, ethnic group, tribe, clan, region, sex, religion, or any other division that may give rise to discrimination. There is no state religion; however, the constitution does include a provision for a ceremonial oath of office for high-level government officials that makes reference to God.

The penal code, Articles 293 to 296, provides for small fines and imprisonment of up to six months for anyone who interferes with a religious ceremony or with a religious minister in the exercise of his or her professional duties. The law regulates public meetings and calls for fines or imprisonment for those who violate these regulations.

In 2001 the Government promulgated a law giving it more influence over NGOs as well as religious institutions and organizations. Subsequently, after consulting with civil society and NGOs, the Government decided to draft separate laws governing local NGOs, international NGOs, and religious organizations. These laws were being developed in collaboration with church officials but have not been promulgated. The existing 2001 law requires NGOs to present their objectives and plan of action to local authorities for "provisional

agreement" and then to apply to the Ministry of Justice for legal recognition. Since the law was implemented, the Ministry of Justice has registered 116 new religious groups; no new religious groups were registered during the period covered by this report. The ministry did not deny any new applications; however, the Government continued the 2003 suspension of two local splinter organizations, the "Eglise Methodiste Unie au Rwanda" (the United Methodist Church of Rwanda) led by Jupa Kaberuka and the "Communauté Methodiste Union Internationale" (the International Union Methodist Community) led by Louis Bwanakweli. Both attempted to register as the primary Methodist group in the country and claimed to be the regional representative of the World Methodist Church, which includes the Rwandan, Kenyan, and Ugandan Methodist Churches.

The dispute between the two organizations was before the High Court at the end of the reporting period. However, in general no group's religious activities were curtailed as a result of difficulties or delays in the registration process.

There were reports that numerous religious organizations operated without legal recognition because the process was arduous, which government officials confirmed. Members of unregistered groups were vulnerable to censorship and possible detention.

The Government permits religious instruction in public schools. In some cases, students were given a choice between instruction in "religion" or "morals." In the past, missionaries established schools that were operated by the Government. In those schools, religious instruction tended to reflect the denomination of the founders, either Catholic or Protestant. Muslim private schools operated as well.

The Government observes six holy days as official holidays: Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Eid-al-Fitr, All Saints' Day, and Assumption. The Government's recognition of these holy days does not negatively affect any religious groups.

Relations between the Government and the Catholic Church continued to improve because of collaboration and dialogue in the areas of education and reconciliation. In addition, Muslims continued to enjoy greater freedom of worship than under the previous government. Sheikh Abdoul Karim Harerimana, a key Muslim figure, publicly stated at a ceremony at the National University of Rwanda on May 10, 2005, that Muslims enjoy freedom of worship without oppression, unlike during previous regimes.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government requires religious groups to provide advance notification of religious meetings held at night. Religious leaders reportedly cooperated with the Government in limiting nighttime religious meetings and did not view this restriction as an infringement on their religious freedom. The Government continued to require religious groups to hold services at their established places of worship and to ban the use of private homes for this purpose. Some small religious groups that met in private homes were forced to move to new locations.

In 2004 the Government suspended the registration of two Pentecostal churches led by American pastors, presumably for alleged irregularities in a pastor's visa application as well as an ongoing dispute over the naming of his church. Further action on the case was pending promulgation of a new law on religious organizations.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses' Office of General Counsel in New York, two Jehovah's Witnesses were detained, released, and forced to pay a fine for not participating in the national anthem. The Office of General Counsel also reported that between February and May 2006, forty-eight members of the Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned in the Kibungo province for not participating in the armed night patrols. As of June 9, 2006, six remained in prison.

All but eleven of the ninety-three Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned or detained in 2005 for failure to participate in night patrols were released without charges in the same year. The eleven whose cases went to court were sentenced from three to six months in prison. Another member of the Jehovah's Witnesses who did not participate in the armed night patrols was accused of rebellion and sentenced in August 2005 to six months in prison. He was released from prison on January 14, 2006.

During the reporting period, following the citing of religious figures and groups in the 2004 parliamentary report on genocide ideology, there were a few reports that religious groups had changed their location or tailored their activities to avoid confrontation with authorities.

Government officials presiding over wedding ceremonies generally required couples to take an oath while touching the national flag, a practice that Jehovah's Witnesses object to on religious grounds. This practice made it difficult for church members to marry, since they had to find officials willing to perform the ceremony without the flag requirement. In 2006 two couples in Bugarsera District were denied marriage certificates due to their refusal to take the marriage oath while touching the national flag.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Local leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses leadership reported a significantly better relationship between their church and the Government. During the period covered by this report, Jehovah's Witnesses officials successfully engaged the Government at the national and local levels on both specific cases and general issues of contention. They reported receiving greatly improved support from the national government and the majority of local government officials.

On January 1, 2006, the Government consolidated the country's territorial administrative structure into 4 provinces, 30 districts, and 416 sectors. The subsequent change in leadership at the district and sector levels required the church leadership to address with new officials issues which were previously resolved with the outgoing leaders. While decisions regarding the church at the ministerial level have been positive, church leadership reported a lack of communication between the national government and some local leaders.

However, there were problems with some local leaders at the sector and district level, including the continued policy of not allowing new Kingdom Halls to be built in Kigali and Muhanaga Districts, the expulsion of six primary students in Nyange District for refusing to attend Christian services in their school, and the detention of forty-eight members in five districts for refusing to participate in community night patrols. In 2006 forty-seven were held for periods of one to six days and released. Two members, who were detained in Huye district, were reportedly beaten by prison guards and released without a trial on May 9, 2006. One member was still in detention at the end of the reporting period. Another member, detained on May 23, 2006, in Kibungo District, was severely beaten by the Executive Secretary of Kirehe-Kigaramwe Sector and released on May 30, 2006.

In several other districts, local officials agreed to alternative services rather than night patrols for members of Jehovah's Witnesses, such as community-building projects. Local officials were not always aware of alternative services available; however, representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses and government officials often mediated to resolve this issue successfully.

In May 2005 two Jehovah's Witnesses in Ngoma District, Eastern Province, were charged with disrespect of public order for refusing to sing the national anthem during a public meeting. A sentence of two months imprisonment was recommended. The verdict was announced by the end of the reporting period and the sentence had not been carried out. A family of Jehovah's Witnesses was arrested and jailed in September for refusing to sing the national anthem during a gacaca proceeding. The mother and child were released after two days, the father after four days.

Pastors Stanislas Ntawurikura and Denis Serugendo, who were arrested in March 2005 in Kibungo Province on charges of "rebellion," were tried, found not guilty, and released in June 2005 along with the other sixteen prisoners.

The eight members of a dissident Catholic congregation ("Mouvement Marial") in Gisenyi Province accused of "subversive activities" and arrested in February 2004 were released without trial on April 13, 2006.

Pentecostal Church leaders detained in February 2003 for meeting at night and conducting a religious service outside their church were released in August 2005 without formal 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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. There were numerous associations and interfaith groups, such as the Ecumenical Council of Churches and the Protestant Council of Rwanda, that contribute to understanding and tolerance among the various religions.

The Interfaith Commission for Rwanda (launched by Muslims, Protestant and Evangelical churches in 2003) promotes unity and reconciliation by supporting activities such as aid programs aimed at reconciling genocide survivors, released genocide prisoners, and genocide detainees' families. Under the leadership the Anglican Archbishop Emmanuel Kolini and Mufti Saleh Habimana, the leader of the country's Muslim community, the Interfaith Commission hosted the Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa (IAPA), an international event attended by a broad cross-section of the religious community, including representatives of Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and traditional African religious groups.

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. Embassy officers maintain regular contact with leaders and members of religious communities.

Embassy officers held numerous meetings with members of the Catholic and Anglican Churches, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, leaders of the Muslim community, and small, evangelical Protestant groups to promote interfaith dialogue and discuss religious freedom. In addition, embassy officers regularly met with local and international NGOs involved in peace, justice, and reconciliation efforts that focus on religious tolerance and freedom. As part of its ongoing dialogue with the Government, the U.S. government addressed and followed individual cases of concern.

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