

BURUNDI 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the state as secular, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for freedom of conscience and religion. It prohibits political parties from preaching religious violence or hate. During the year, government officials and Catholic Church representatives made efforts to ameliorate tensions. The followers of a woman who reported experiencing visitations from the Virgin Mary were released from prison in 2016, but some of them continued to be subject to judicial proceedings under consideration by the Supreme Court. A Jehovah's Witness couple who refused to hold the national flag during their marriage ceremony for religious reasons was arrested and released without charges. In December security services detained members of an unrecognized religious group suspected of engaging in political activities but released them without charge. On December 27, security services also detained and later released 13 Ahmadi Muslims who were visiting the Ahmadiyya mosque in Bujumbura. In May President Pierre Nkurunziza launched a campaign to "moralize society" by requiring unmarried couples to legalize their relationships in marriage by the end of the year. Civil society activists criticized the campaign as a "religious crusade." The president led the country's 14th annual National Prayer Breakfast on November 14, with the theme "Be the change you wish to see." He regularly employed religious rhetoric in political speeches. In January the Ministry of the Interior established a monitoring body to settle intra and interdenominational disputes and track subversive or inflammatory teachings.

Religious denominations engaged in efforts to promote interfaith dialogue. In October religious leaders representing the Catholic Church, Protestant denominations, and the Islamic community met in Arusha, Tanzania, under the auspices of the World Council of Churches and the UN Office on the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect. The leaders issued a joint communique promising to undertake interfaith efforts for peace and reconciliation.

The U.S. ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government and urged the government to respect the rights of individuals and organizations, including religious groups. The embassy encouraged societal leaders, including representatives of major faith groups, to support religious acceptance and promote interfaith discussion of the collaborative role religious groups could play in disseminating a message of peace and tolerance to the population.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.5 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2008 national census, 62 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 21.6 Protestant, 2.5 Muslim, and 2.3 Seventh-day Adventist. Another 6.1 percent have no religious affiliation, and 3.7 percent belong to indigenous religious groups. The Muslim population lives mainly in urban areas, and the head of the Islamic Community of Burundi estimates Muslims constitute closer to 10-12 percent of the population. Most Muslims are Sunni. There are some Shia Muslims and a small Ismaili community. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox Christians, The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Hindus, and Jains.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes a secular state; prohibits religious discrimination; recognizes freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; and provides for equal protection under the law regardless of religion. These rights may be limited by law in the general interest or to protect the rights of others, and may not be abused to compromise national unity, independence, peace, democracy, or the secular nature of the state, or to violate the constitution. The constitution prohibits political parties from preaching religious violence, exclusion, or hate.

The government recognizes and registers religious groups through the law covering nonprofit organizations, which states these organizations must register with the Ministry of Interior. There is a 20,000 Burundian franc (\$12) fee for registration. Each religious group must provide the denomination or affiliation of the institution, a copy of its bylaws, the address of its headquarters in the country, an address abroad if the local institution is part of a larger group, and the names and addresses of the association's governing body and legal representative. Registration also entails identifying any property and bank accounts owned by the religious group. The ministry usually processes registration requests within two to four weeks. Leaders of religious groups who fail to comply or who practice in spite of denial of their registration are subject to six months' to five years' imprisonment.

The law does not generally grant tax exemptions or other benefits to religious groups, with certain exceptions. Some religious and nonreligious schools have signed agreements with the government entitling them to tax exemptions when investing in infrastructure or purchasing school equipment and educational materials.

The official curriculum includes religion and morality classes for all secondary and primary schools. The program offers religious instruction for Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam, although all classes may not be available if the number of students interested is insufficient in a particular school. Students are free to choose from one of these three religion classes or attend morality classes instead.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In August during a civil marriage ceremony in Karuzi Province, a Jehovah's Witness couple refused to pronounce their marriage vows while holding the national flag – a practice common in civil marriages but not required by law. The couple was arrested and detained in a jail in Karuzi. They were released two weeks later without any charges and were subsequently allowed to marry, pronouncing their vows with their hands on the Bible.

The government sometimes prevented religious groups without official recognition from holding meetings. In December police and members of the National Intelligence Service (SNR) detained members of an unrecognized Christian congregation in Mwaro Province during a late-night prayer session. Members of the security services reportedly believed that the group was engaged in political activities rather than, or in addition to, prayer, reflecting widespread restrictions on the freedom of assembly in the country. The detained individuals were subsequently released without charges.

On December 27, SNR agents detained 13 Ahmadi Muslims between 12 and 24 years of age who were visiting the Ahmadiyya mosque in Bujumbura, reportedly on suspicion that they were members of the al-Shabaab terrorist group. They were subsequently released, allegedly for a bribe.

The Ministry of the Interior sometimes denied requests for registration from religious groups but did not make information available on the applicants who were refused or the reasons for refusal.

Following tense rhetorical exchanges between the government and the Catholic Church over political issues exacerbated by the 2015 presidential election, observers stated that both government officials and members of the Catholic hierarchy made efforts to improve relations. In August Archbishop of Gitega Simon Ntamwana inaugurated a government-organized prayer retreat in Gitega, which was attended by President Nkurunziza and other senior officials.

President Nkurunziza routinely employed religious rhetoric in the context of political speeches and invoked divine guidance for political decisions. In a November speech, he lauded the members of the Imbonerakure, the youth wing of the ruling CNDD-FDD party, by using a play on words in which he called God “the first Imbonerakure,” literally “one who sees far” or “a visionary.”

In May the president issued a decree launching a campaign requiring unmarried couples to legalize their relationships by the end of the year. The Ministry of the Interior subsequently announced that couples who did not marry before the end of the year could face fines of 50,000 francs (\$29), based on the provisions of the criminal code against unmarried cohabitation, and that children born out of wedlock would not be eligible for waivers on primary school fees and other social services. The media described this as a campaign to “moralize society.” The president stated that church- and state-sanctioned weddings were an effort to reinforce positive moral values. Civil society activists said that compelling cohabitating couples to marry was part of a “religious crusade” led by the president and his wife.

In January the Ministry of the Interior announced the establishment of a new religious monitoring body to “monitor, regulate, and settle” inter and intradenominational disputes and to ensure that religious organizations operate according to law. The committee was also charge with tracking subversive or inflammatory teachings. Eight of the 11 members named were religious leaders, with no representative from the Catholic Church. There were no reports of the body taking action during the year.

Some of the followers of Eusebie Ngendakumana who had earlier been released from prison were subject to continued legal proceedings under consideration by the Supreme Court, according to their lawyer. Ngendakumana, who remained in exile in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was accused of leading an unrecognized cult that formed after she reported seeing visions of the Virgin Mary in 2013.

Government benefits, such as tax waivers, continued to be granted to religious groups for the acquisition of materials to manage development projects. According to the Burundi Revenue Authority, tax waivers were granted to religious denominations for the import of religious materials such as printed materials, wines for the observation of Mass, and equipment to produce communion wafers. The authority granted to a Catholic congregation a tax waiver for the purchase of building material for a new convent, and to a diocese for the import of two vehicles for its development projects.

President Nkurunziza led the country's 14th annual National Prayer Breakfast on November 14, with the theme "Be the change you wish to see." The president's speech focused on the need "to root out evil and to plant good," alternating his message between a call for citizens to work for change and offering that "some things only God can do."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders from different denominations sought to promote improved interfaith relations, which at times were strained by political differences. In October religious leaders representing the Catholic Church, Protestant denominations, and the Islamic community met in Arusha, Tanzania, under the auspices of the World Council of Churches and the UN Office on the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect. The leaders issued a joint communique promising to undertake interfaith efforts for national peace and reconciliation. They called on the Burundian government to establish conditions for peaceful, free, and fair elections in 2020, and on political leaders to renounce violence. The Catholic Church subsequently issued a separate communique sharing the joint message's determination to promote peace through interfaith efforts.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government and urged the government to respect the rights of individuals and organizations, including religious groups.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials continued to encourage and support broad-based religious acceptance and dialogue in meetings with religious leaders from different faiths and denominations and through engagement with civil society organizations supporting interfaith dialogue. The embassy encouraged societal

leaders, including political leaders and representatives of major faith groups, to support religious acceptance and promote interfaith discussion of the collaborative role religious groups could play in disseminating a message of peace and tolerance to the population.