

BURUNDI 2021 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. Laws regulating religious groups require them to register with the Ministry of Interior, and religious groups must meet certain standards, including a minimum number of adherents, in order to seek registration. Authorities released former Seventh-day Adventist Church president Lameck Barishinga from prison in February without charges; he had been imprisoned since October 2019. In October, police arrested and imprisoned approximately 40 followers of Eusebie Ngendakumana, considered a Catholic prophet by her followers, after they attempted to visit a shrine in Kayanza Province. The Islamic Community of Burundi failed to elect a new mufti after the apparent forced withdrawal of a leading candidate in January and the Minister of Interior, Public Security, and Community Development refused to accept the outcome of February elections. In October, the Minister of Interior called for near-term elections for a new mufti amid media reports suggesting the ministry was orchestrating vote rigging. In June, Imam Rashid Ndikumana of Bujumbura was arrested after he accused the Minister of Interior, Public Security, and Community Development of attacking Islam and demanding the minister's resignation and apology for remarks requesting that mosques lower the volume of early-morning calls to prayer so as not to disturb the public. President Evariste Ndayishimiye met with the Catholic Bishops Conference of Burundi in August to review the Catholic Church's role as a major collaborator with state institutions in education, national reconciliation, and community development, and the bishops committed to encouraging congregants to support development projects.

The Independent National Human Rights Commission organized a workshop and training session for religious leaders to promote and protect human rights, including the rights of prisoners.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials met with key religious leaders, including from the Anglican and Catholic Churches and Muslim communities, to discuss ways to improve religious freedom in the country and confront other challenges, as well as ways to promote peace and reconciliation. In September, the embassy extended for two more years its support of the Inter-Religious Council of Burundi.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12.2 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2008 national census (the most recent), 62 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 21.6 percent Protestant, 2.5 percent Muslim, and 2.3 percent Seventh-day Adventist. Another 6.1 percent have no religious affiliation, and 3.7 percent belong to indigenous religious groups. The head of the Islamic Community of Burundi, however, estimates Muslims constitute 10-12 percent of the population. The Muslim population lives mainly in urban areas; most are Sunni, although there are some Shia communities as well as a small number of Ismaili Muslims in Bujumbura. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Church of the Rock, Free Methodist, Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox Christians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Eglise Vivante, Eglise du Bon Berger, Hindus, and Jains. According to 2018 statistics from the Ministry of Interior, there are approximately 1,000 religious groups in the country.

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.

By law, all religious celebrations and prayer sessions must not cause harm to the natural environment and must respect public order.

The government recognizes and registers religious groups through a 2014 law governing the operational framework of religious groups, which states these organizations must register with the Ministry of Interior. There is a 20,000 Burundian franc (\$10) 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 requires identifying any property and bank

accounts owned by the religious group. The ministry usually processes registration requests within two to four weeks. Leaders, administrators, or adherents of religious groups who continue to practice after denial of their registration application, or after a group has been dissolved or suspended, are subject to six months to five years of imprisonment, a fine, or both.

The law regulating religious groups provides additional specific registration requirements. Any new, independent religious group based in the country must have a minimum of 300 members to qualify. Foreign-based religious groups seeking to establish a presence in the country must have at least 500 members to qualify. The law prohibits foreigners from being part of executive and decision-making committees of religious groups at the national level.

The law on religious groups does not provide broad tax exemptions or other benefits; however, the financial laws exempt from tax goods imported by religious groups if the groups can demonstrate importation of the goods is in the public interest. Some religious schools have agreements with the government entitling them to tax exemptions when investing in infrastructure or purchasing school equipment and educational materials.

The official school curriculum includes religion and morality classes for all primary and secondary schools. The program offers religious instruction in 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 classes or attend morality classes instead.

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

Government Practices

Authorities released former Seventh-day Adventist Church president Lameck Barishinga from prison in February; he had been arrested and imprisoned since October 2019 without formal charges. His arrest followed a dispute among leaders within the Burundi Seventh-day Adventist Church, including a disagreement over the disposition of church funds that led to violence among church members. The East-Central Africa Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church issued an official statement in February thanking God, the Government of Burundi, and people around the world for Barishinga's release, characterizing his imprisonment as having been "for his faith."

Media reported that police arrested approximately 40 followers of Eusebie Ngendakumana, also known as Zebiya, on October 12 and detained them in an Ngozi prison on charges of public disturbance after they attempted to visit a shrine in anticipation of a Marian apparition (appearance of the Virgin Mary). Ngendakumana, whom her followers described as a Catholic prophet, set up a shrine at her home in Businde, Gahombo commune, in Kayanza Province, stating that she had regular visions of the Virgin Mary on the 12th of each month, and urged followers to join her. Her followers, who had been deported from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Burundi in 2020 after five years spent in South Kivu and North Kivu Provinces in eastern Congo, said they feared for their safety in Burundi and believed that Businde is a holy place where they had to make a pilgrimage and commune with God. Community residents complained of noise levels and a lack of respect for their property on the part of Ngendakumana's followers, which led to physical altercations between the groups, causing police to intervene and prohibit the followers from accessing the shrine. Police had sought to locate and arrest Ngendakumana for six years on charges of "inciting civil disobedience." The group had not sought accreditation as a religious denomination because members stated they considered themselves members of the Catholic Church. Catholic Church representatives in the country stated publicly that Ngendakumana did not represent the Church.

Following disputes over the election of their next leader, representatives of the Islamic Community of Burundi (COMIBU) met with Minister of Interior, Public Security, and Community Development Gervais Ndirakobuca on October 16 to discuss its election plans. Disagreements on succession within COMIBU arose after the August 2020 resignation of the former mufti and legal representative of COMIBU, Sheikh Sadiki Kajandi, who resigned after being accused of selling COMIBU property and using the proceeds for personal benefit. The government then appointed Kajandi as ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and Sheikh Jacques Ya'quub Nahayo, deputy mufti, became COMIBU's interim legal representative for a term of six months.

COMIBU's electoral commission put forward two candidates for the position of mufti in January, and the Superior Council of Sheikhs put forward its candidate, Sheikh Yusuf Gihete, a former legal representative of COMIBU. Several days later, the deputy mufti asked the Superior Council of Sheikhs to withdraw Gihete from consideration, indicating only that the decision for withdrawal came from "higher up."

In February, the COMIBU general assembly elected Sheikh Hassan Nyamweru as mufti, but the Ministry of Interior refused to accept and validate the results, stating that some individuals eligible to vote in the election were excluded from the opportunity to vote. Following the failed election, Minister of Interior Ndirakobuca agreed to a proposal by the deputy mufti for establishing a temporary management commission directed by the Superior Council of Sheikhs to lead COMIBU for one year on a nonrenewable basis. In October the minister invited the president of COMIBU's general assembly and the 11 bodies that make up COMIBU to attend a meeting to find a solution for organizing elections. Media reported that many in attendance were not legitimate members of the 11 COMIBU bodies, inferring that such attendees were there to support the candidate favored by the government. The Minister of Interior directed that elections should be held within two weeks of October 16. Elections finally took place on November 13, resulting in the election of Sheikh Shabani Ali as the new mufti.

In a June meeting with religious leaders, Minister of Interior Ndirakobuca asked Muslim sheikhs to lower the volume of early-morning calls to prayer so as not to disturb the public while sleeping. At the same meeting, he asked Christian religious leaders to discontinue high-volume night prayer services. In response, Rashid Ndikumana, an imam at a small mosque on the outskirts of Bujumbura, accused Ndirakobuca of openly attacking Islam and demanded his resignation and an apology. Some Muslim representatives said his comments were an insult to the minister and called on Ndikumana to withdraw his remarks and apologize. Authorities arrested Ndikumana the day after his comments, and he reportedly remained in detention at year's end.

Media reported on weekly visits by government officials to various churches throughout the year, including by President Ndayishimiye, Prime Minister Allain-Guillaume Bunyoni, Speaker of the National Assembly Gelais-Daniel Ndabirabe, and President of the Senate Emmanuel Sinzohagera. In some instances, church leaders gave officials opportunity to preach about scriptures and moral issues. Senate President Sinzohagera also served as the legal representative of the Free Methodist Church.

President Ndayishimiye met with the Catholic Bishops Conference of Burundi on August 13 to review the Church's role as a major collaborator with state institutions for providing services and praised the Church's contributions to education, national reconciliation, and community development. He reiterated the willingness of the government to promote socioeconomic equality and to uphold the rule of law. He said the Catholic Church would be invaluable in mobilizing

citizens for the development of their country, resulting in job creation, improvement of living conditions, and poverty reduction. The bishops committed to encouraging development projects and pointed to an increase in trust between the population and government authorities, despite isolated cases of abuse of power in some local administrations.

The government continued to grant benefits such as tax waivers to religious groups for the acquisition of materials to manage development projects. According to the Burundi Revenue Authority, the government also granted tax waivers for imported items such as printed religious materials, wine for masses or other religious services, and equipment to produce communion wafers. The revenue agency organized a meeting with religious leaders to explain the obligation to pay tax on commercial activities of their groups.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Independent National Human Rights Commission organized a workshop and training session on April 8 for religious leaders on the role of religious organizations in the promotion and protection of human rights. Representatives from religious communities spoke and emphasized their contributions to establishing respect for human rights and made future commitments.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly met with key religious leaders, including from the Anglican and Catholic Churches and Muslim communities, to discuss ways to improve religious freedom in the country. The embassy encouraged community leaders, including political leaders and representatives of major faith-based groups, to support the acceptance of all religious groups, as well as to promote interfaith discussion regarding the collaborative role religious groups could play in disseminating a message of peace and religious tolerance to the wider population.

During a series of September and October meetings with some of the country's prominent religious leaders, including from the Inter-Religious Council of Burundi (CICB), the Ambassador and the leaders discussed the country's top challenges and how religious groups could help address them. The Ambassador also met with the secretary general of the National Council of Churches of Burundi as part of the U.S. continued commitment to encourage reconciliation. In September, the embassy extended for two more years its support of the CIBC.