

ZIMBABWE 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom to practice, propagate, and give expression to one's religion, in public or in private and alone or with others. The Constitutional Court in December 2020 ruled against recitation of the national pledge in schools, which contains the phrase "Almighty God," determining it to be a violation of students' right to freedom of conscience. Religious and civil society groups continued to report the government monitored public events, prayer rallies, church congregations, and religiously affiliated nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) perceived to be critical of the government. NGOs continued to report that security services targeted some religious officials who engaged in political discourse perceived as negative toward the government. Talent Farai Chiwenga, founder of Apostle T.F. Chiwenga Ministries, remained in hiding. According to Chiwenga, the government targeted him for using his sermons to criticize what he said was the country's culture of impunity for government officials who committed human rights abuses, including his cousin, Vice President Constantino Chiwenga. The Zimbabwe Gender Commission investigated the case of Anna Machaya, a 15-year-old member of the Johane Marange Apostolic Church who died in childbirth in July. Many commentators deemed her death a result of her early and illegal marriage as well as medical neglect. Parliament debated legislation to remove the current legal ambiguity between the constitutional age of marriage (18 for males) and the age of marriage found in other legislation (16 for females) but had not voted it into law by year's end. According to media, in November, parliament published the Private Voluntary Organization Amendment Bill (PVO Bill), which proposed amendments to the existing law governing PVOs. The goal of the bill was to address regional and global concerns about money laundering and terrorism financing, according to its memorandum. By year's end, the bill had not begun public hearings, but drew concern and criticism from the religious community, which expressed unease that if passed, the bill would limit rights of assembly and expression and could limit or eliminate much needed assistance to citizens. The government engaged religious leaders to address COVID-19 misinformation and promote vaccination. Some churches, however, expressed concern that the government selectively enforced COVID-19 safety protocols, allowing secular venues to open before churches, and allowing thousands to attend the Johane Marange Apostolic Church's July Passover celebration while keeping other churches closed and banning public religious gatherings. After churches opened in August but only for vaccinated attendees, religious leaders criticized the

government for not making provision for adherents who did not have access to the COVID-19 vaccine.

According to observers, child marriage increased across faiths during the COVID-19 pandemic and became a subject for social and religious debate following Machaya case. Some church organizations released public letters condemning child marriage. Some Christian groups, such as the Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust and Johane the Fifth of Africa International Apostolic Church, continued to engage in ecumenical dialogue with other Apostolic religious groups to end child marriages and overcome immunization prohibitions. Although some religious leaders with large followings warned against COVID-19 vaccines and associated them with the devil, other faith leaders publicly supported vaccine drives, addressed vaccine hesitancy, and worked to build acceptance of prevention protocols among their members. The Zimbabwe Interreligious Council (ZIRC) interfaith platform, which convenes Christians and Muslims “to promote peace, reconciliation, good governance and holistic human development through interfaith action and collaboration,” officially launched in November after having met informally for two years.

To underscore the importance of religious tolerance, the U.S. Charge d’Affaires met with the leader of the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) secretariat and the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) in May. U.S. embassy officials met with the secretary general of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC), the chair of ZHOCD, the chair of ZIRC, the president of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Zimbabwe, the ZCC, the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe (UDACIZA), the Johane the Fifth of Africa International Apostolic Church, Jewish leaders, members of the humanist community, and faith-based organizations to discuss religious freedom, religious tolerance, and the role of faith communities in supporting political reconciliation and national healing. In various meetings and settings, embassy officials condemned child marriage and urged religious leaders not to serve as enablers of the illegal practice.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 14.8 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2015 nationwide Demographic and Health Survey conducted by the government statistics agency, the most recent such survey, 86 percent of the population is Christian – 37 percent Apostolic, 21 percent Pentecostal, 16 percent other Protestant, 7 percent Roman Catholic, and 5 percent other Christian.

According to the survey, 11 percent of the population reports no religious affiliation, less than 2 percent adheres uniquely to traditional beliefs, and less than 1 percent is Muslim.

While there are no reliable statistics regarding the percentage of the Christian population that is syncretic, many Christians also associate themselves with traditional practices, and religious leaders report a continued increase in syncretism.

Most of the Muslim population lives in rural areas and some high-density suburbs, with smaller numbers living in other suburban neighborhoods. There are also small numbers of Greek Orthodox, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Baha'is, and humanists. Greek Orthodox and Jewish communities describe their membership as aging and diminishing in numbers.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious belief and provides for freedom of religion and the freedom to practice, propagate, and give expression to one's religion in public or in private and alone or with others. It recognizes the right of prisoners to communicate with and receive visits from their chosen religious counselor. It stipulates these rights may be limited by law during a state of emergency or by a law that takes into account, among other things, the interests of defense; public safety, order, morality, or health; regional or town planning; or the general public interest. Any such law must not impose greater restrictions on these rights than is necessary to achieve the purpose of the law. Although the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA) restricts freedom of assembly, expression, and association in practice, the act specifies that MOPA is not meant to apply to public gatherings "held exclusively for bona fide religious, educational, recreational, sporting, or charitable purposes."

The criminal code prohibits statements that are "insulting" or "grossly provocative" and that cause offense to persons of a particular race, tribe, place of origin, color, creed, or religion, or intend to cause such offense. Individuals convicted under this law are subject to a fine, imprisonment for a period not exceeding one year, or both.

The government does not require religious groups to register, although religious

groups operating schools or medical facilities must register those institutions with the appropriate ministry. Religious groups, as well as schools and medical facilities run by religious groups, may receive tax-exempt status. Religious groups may apply for tax-exempt status and duty-free privileges with the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA), which generally grants these requests. To obtain tax-exempt status, a group is required to bring a letter of approval from a church umbrella organization confirming the group's status as a religious group. Examples of approval letter-granting organizations include the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC), Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), and the Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe. ZIMRA generally grants a certificate of tax-exempt status within two to three days of receipt.

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education sets curricula for public primary and secondary schools. Many public primary schools require a religious education course focusing on Christianity and including other religious groups, with an emphasis on religious tolerance. Respect for ethical humanism, agnosticism, and atheism is not part of the curriculum. There is no provision for opting out of religious instruction courses at the primary level. Students may opt out at the secondary level beginning at age 14, when they begin to choose their courses. The government does not regulate religious education in private schools but must approve the employment of headmasters and teachers at those schools. Private schools run by religious organizations may take religious affiliation into account in their admission decisions and may mandate that students participate in religious rites.

Some vaccinations are required for public school enrollment, but not for private schools.

According to a 2020 Constitutional Court decision, it is unconstitutional to recite the national pledge in schools on the grounds that that would be a violation of students' right to freedom of conscience. The pledge includes the phrase "Almighty God."

The law requires all international NGOs registered as PVOs, including religiously affiliated NGOs, to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the government defining the NGO's activities and zones of geographic coverage. The law stipulates international NGOs "shall not digress into programs that are not specified in the MOU as agreed upon by line ministries and registered by the Registrar." Local NGOs, including those that are faith-based, have no legal requirements to sign an MOU with the government but "shall, prior to their

registration, notify the local authorities of their intended operations.” The law gives the government the right to “deregister any private voluntary organization that fails to comply with its conditions of registration.”

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

Government Practices

Religious and civil society groups reported the government continued to selectively monitor public events, prayer rallies, church congregations, and religiously affiliated NGOs perceived to be critical of the government. NGOs and religious leaders continued to report that security services targeted some religious officials who engaged in political discourse perceived as negative toward the government. Talent Farai Chiwenga, the founder of Apostle T.F. Chiwenga Ministries, remained in hiding since 2019 after accusing state security agents of attempting to kill him in car crashes in 2018 and 2019, one of which killed his wife and two church members. He said state security agents targeted him for addressing in his sermons what he said was the country’s culture of impunity for government officials who committed human rights abuses, including his cousin, Vice President Constantino Chiwenga. He further stated government employees who attended his church services were subjected to surveillance.

According to one faith leader, security services targeted religious officials who publicly objected to COVID-19 vaccines, as well as officials who criticized what they described as the government’s politicized distribution of food aid. Human rights groups said the government selectively enforced COVID-19 regulations to silence those who wished to organize public protests against the government, while allowing progovernment and religious groups seen as loyal to the ruling party to gather in the thousands. For example, the government allowed thousands to attend the Johane Marange Apostolic Church’s July Passover celebration, while keeping other churches closed and banning public religious gatherings. As public events and commentary moved online during the COVID-19 pandemic, presidential spokesperson George Charamba tracked and commented on views perceived as critical of the state’s enforcement of pandemic-related restrictions.

Officials published proposed amendments to the existing PVO Act in the government *Gazette* on November 5, with the goal, according to its memorandum, of addressing recommendations from the Financial Action Task Force to improve the government’s anti-money laundering and counterterrorism financing regime, streamlining administrative procedures to allow for efficient regulation and

administration of PVOs, and preventing PVOs from undertaking political lobbying. If passed, members of civil society stated, the amendments would extend the definition of PVO to more NGOs, including faith-based organizations if their charitable activities extended beyond religious work. Faith-based organizations are currently exempt from PVO Act requirements as trusts, but under the proposed amendments, the Minister of Public Service, Labor, and Social Welfare could designate organizations that were exempt during the year. In addition, the Registrar of PVOs, who was also the Director of Social Welfare acting in an interim capacity until an appointment was made, could serve trusts with a notice requiring them to swear they would not collect contributions from the public or outside the country, or to register as PVOs. According to civil society representatives, the amendments would also increase reporting requirements for PVOs, impose vague and potentially arbitrary registration requirements that could limit legitimate human rights work, criminalize work perceived to support or work against any political party or candidate, set civil and criminal penalties for lack of compliance, and allow the government to suspend board members and replace them with government-appointed trustees who could control a PVO's funding and operations, with few limitations. Civil society representatives and the religious community criticized the bill for limiting rights of assembly and expression and potentially limiting or eliminating groups' – including religious groups' – ability to provide much needed assistance to citizens. In December, four UN special rapporteurs issued an open letter to President Mnangagwa expressing concern that the amendments would “have grave consequences for the exercise of civil and political rights,” including the freedom of religion or belief. By year's end, public parliamentary debate on the bill had not begun.

According to press reports, the High Court ruled in November that the private Pentecostal Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University could not violate the country's constitution to discriminate against student Modester Zinhanga. The university had blocked her candidacy to run in student elections because she was not a member of the church that runs the university, the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God in Africa, and was not being able to speak in tongues.

In September, the Humanist Society of Zimbabwe (HAZ) reported that the government denied its application to register as a nonprofit company without a stated reason for its action. Representatives said bias against nonreligious individuals likely contributed to the government's decision. The HAZ was formed in 2017 to advocate for the interests of humanists and nonreligious individuals.

According to ZCBC members, its August 2020 pastoral letter calling on the

government to build peace, eradicate corruption, and strive for stability and good governance continued to shape the religious landscape. Despite government officials' negative reaction to the letter in 2020, ZCBC members reported in October that it had ultimately resulted in improved ZCBC coordination, cooperation, and communication with the government, the security sector, and independent commissions supporting democracy, and that it had encouraged parliamentarians to consult citizens, including the religious community, more widely on proposed legislation.

The Zimbabwe Gender Commission investigated the death of 15-year-old Anna Machaya, a member of the Johanne Marange Church, who died during childbirth after suffering prolonged birth complications without being taken to a hospital for care. Many commentators attributed her death to the Church's child marriage practices, which violated the constitution. Proposed legislation from 2019 to remove the current legal ambiguity between the age of marriage in the constitution (18) and current marriage law ("under the age of 16" for females and "under the age of 18" for males with consent of the Minister of Justice, 16 for females with parental consent, and 18 for males) remained pending in parliament, despite several calls to expedite its passage. On October 4, private citizen Sharon Moffat, the Legal Resources Foundation, and the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe asked the High Court to order the Johanne Marange Church and independent African Apostolic churches under the Apostolic Churches Council to publish messages that child marriage was not an essential article of faith and was illegal. They also asked the court to order government departments to take steps to bring an end to child marriage. The court had not issued a decision by year's end.

Most official state and school gatherings and functions continued to include nondenominational Christian prayers, as did political party gatherings, Zimbabwe Broadcast Corporation board meetings, and parastatal meetings. Members of the judiciary and government officials, upon assuming office, often swore on the Bible, but this was not required.

The government continued to enforce a 2018 ban on all radio and state-run television programs advertising prophets and traditional healing, for example selling "tickets to heaven" or a traditional cure for HIV/AIDS. Pastor Walter Magaya, however, continued to use his online platform to promote traditional and faith healing.

According to media, the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) did not approve licensing applications pending for more than two decades from the Jesuits

(Society of Jesus) and Catholic dioceses. No church-based broadcasters were included among the 17 radio broadcast licenses awarded since December 2020, although church leaders indicated they participated in some new community and university radio stations' shows. ZCBC representatives said that in the past two years, its members had shifted from requesting national licenses to community-based licenses. The BAZ stated no legal provision existed allowing it to award licenses to communities of interest, such as religious groups.

In the absence of radio licenses, many faith-based communities broadcast on social media platforms. These platforms include the Shona-language Catholic Radio Chiedza and FEBA Radio, both on Facebook. The country's most popular social media personality, Harare-based Mufti Menk, had 7.9 million Twitter followers, most of whom resided outside of the country. Religious leaders, however, said traditional radio would reach greater numbers at lower costs. Some religious communities also provided internet to rural communities to expand the reach of their ministry, provide access to services, and support early warning systems for disaster-prone locales.

Churches reported working with the Zimbabwe Prison and Correctional Services to help improve living conditions in prison facilities; fund prisoner examinations for continuing education; provide masks, clothes, and food to inmates; and deliver humanitarian, pastoral, and psycho-social counseling services to inmates and ex-inmates within COVID-19 prevention protocols. As part of COVID-19 lockdown measures, the government limited services that churches could provide.

Faith leaders said it would be inappropriate for them to join the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF)-led Political Actors Dialogue platform, since they were nonpolitical. They declined participation in what they described as an attempt to expand the political platform to include faith and civil society leaders. They urged President Emmerson Mnangagwa to create a more suitable multistakeholder platform for a more comprehensive national dialogue.

As part of its #IprayIvote campaign and efforts to promote national dialogue, the ZCC hosted the Zambian Council of Churches to learn about the role churches played in promoting what it viewed as Zambia's smooth elections and peaceful transition.

During the year, churches distributed copies of the constitution and led dialogues on citizen rights. Some church leaders expressed their communities' concerns that new legislation such as the Data Protection Act and proposed legislation such as

the PVO Amendment Bill and the Patriotic Bill would limit freedom of assembly and expression. Further concerns included early political and electoral violence ahead of byelections and general elections, the slow alignment of existing laws with the constitution, and constitutional amendments that strengthened executive control over other branches of government.

According to local newspaper *NewsDay*, the Apostolic Johane Masowe WechiShanu WeAfrica group reportedly offered to help rally voters for the ZANU-PF party in exchange for official affiliate status. The newspaper said ZANU-PF's acting commissar indicated the group would have to oppose homosexuality and same-sex marriage as necessary preconditions to gain official affiliate status.

The government engaged religious leaders to address COVID-19 misinformation and promote vaccination. While generally supportive of government COVID-19 lockdown measures, faith leaders also said the measures curtailed the freedom of religion and assembly, particularly by keeping churches closed when schools, tourist services, and restaurants were opened. Some religious leaders also criticized the perceived inequitable enforcement of these measures by religious institutions. According to *NewsDay*, the Johane Marange Apostolic Church's annual Passover conference, held July 3 to July 17 at the Mafararikwa shrine in Manicaland, drew thousands of attendees, despite COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. The government, however, barred other churches from holding in-person services, banned public religious gatherings, and limited funeral attendance to 30 persons to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Widespread discussion of the Passover conference on social media led the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights to submit a formal letter demanding police shut down the meeting, in accordance with lockdown measures. Home Affairs Minister Kazembe Kazembe, however, told the press that only a few individuals who resided permanently at the site had attended the event.

On August 11, for the first time during the year, the government announced churches could begin in-person services, but only for fully vaccinated attendees. After wide consultations, the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) issued a statement cautiously welcoming resumption of services, but also expressing concerns about the practical and religious implementation of the guidance. The statement urged ZHOCD member churches to follow World Health Organization protocols when they opened, but it also stated it respected churches that continued to conduct online services. It recommended the government consult churches on decisions that impact them in the future, include churches on the COVID-19 National Task Force, and clarify ambiguities about how churches

should treat members who were not able to gain access to a vaccine and the more than 90 percent of the population that had not yet been vaccinated. On August 13, presidential spokesperson George Charamba criticized the head of the ZCC, Reverend Kenneth Mtata, for his “monumental lapse of both intellect and leadership” in response to the ZHOCD consensus statement, which Charamba viewed as a critique of the government.

The state-controlled *Herald* reported police arrested a Christ Embassy Ministries pastor on August 15 and fined him 2,000 Zimbabwe dollars (\$19) for leading a gathering of 50 unvaccinated congregants, in violation of COVID-19 regulations. Faith leaders who met with President Mnangagwa soon after the incident quoted the President as saying no directive had been given to arrest unvaccinated churchgoers or pastors. A High Court decision in September ruled unvaccinated worshipers could attend church, and it barred police from arresting unvaccinated attendees. On September 14, however, Information Minister Monica Mutsvangwa said, “Whilst all other gatherings shall not exceed 100 persons, with regards to churches, [the] Cabinet has resolved that only vaccinated congregants can attend and should be limited to 50 percent of the holding capacity of the church.” In October, the government relaxed enforcement of all COVID-19 preventive measures, but it reapplied curfew measures again in December when COVID-19 cases spiked. Church leaders and the press reported there were no further arrests of faith leaders or unvaccinated attendees of religious services nor official attempts to verify vaccination status within religious communities or in schools run by religious groups.

Some religious leaders said the initial delivery of COVID-19 messages through ZANU-PF party channels, rather than through the government, sowed distrust. Others said they perceived government outreach to faith leaders as an attempt to overcome this mistrust. In May, the Ministry of Health and Child Care, Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust and UNICEF hosted an interfaith dialogue with Christian, Muslim, and African traditional religious leaders from across the country to support the COVID-19 vaccine distribution. Sheikh Ishmael Duwa, President of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Zimbabwe, said he decided to receive the vaccine publicly to demonstrate its safety and to encourage vaccination among Muslims and the wider population. He said he was the first Muslim leader in the country to do so.

President Mnangagwa and the National Council of Chiefs announced on August 21 that each traditional chief in Matabeleland North and South would lead efforts to resolve, on a case-by-case basis, grievances associated with 1980s-era

Gukurahundi massacres that involved mass killings of mainly Ndebele civilians by government forces. Church and civic organizations met and supported traditional chiefs and faith leaders to implement this effort in affected communities through training and dialogue. Churches also led several efforts to support local communities as the national government transferred power to them.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Members of the Apostolic community varied greatly in their approach to general vaccinations. A 2017 study noted the percentage of Apostolic children vaccinated ranged from 14 to 100, depending on the vaccine in question. In the past, the government threatened to arrest some Apostolic community members for failure to vaccinate their children, but no arrests were reported during the year.

NewsDay reported in May that some Apostolic members from Manicaland withdrew their children from school, citing concerns they would be vaccinated against COVID-19 in violation of their religious doctrine. The government, however, did not initiate any vaccination campaigns at schools.

While some religious leaders with large followings warned against COVID-19 vaccines and associated them with the devil, other faith leaders publicly supported vaccine drives, addressed vaccine hesitancy, and worked to build acceptance of prevention protocols among their members. On one occasion, an evangelical preacher with ties to the government initially told his followers that the vaccine was “the mark of the beast” before clarifying that only vaccines that used mRNA technology were the mark of the beast. He said that vaccines produced through traditional technology (such as the ones made in China promoted by the government) were not.

According to observers, child marriage increased across faith communities during the year due in part to increased economic pressures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The July death during childbirth of 15-year-old Anna Machaya at the Johane Marange Apostolic Church shrine drew widespread condemnation of child marriage and its religious supporters among national leaders, including religious leaders and government officials such as ZHOCD, which includes the Union of the Development of Apostolic and Zionist Churches of Zimbabwe (UDACIZA) and Women Affairs Minister Sithembiso Nyoni. Some Christian groups, such as the Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust and Johane the Fifth of Africa International Apostolic Church, continued to engage in ecumenical dialogue with other Apostolic religious groups to end child marriages and overcome

immunization prohibitions. A May report by the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights stated members of some Apostolic churches reportedly encouraged girls as young as 10 to marry older men for spiritual guidance. A ZHOCD statement called for churches to stop protecting perpetrators of child marriage and to report abuse against girls and women. The statement also urged police to investigate the Machaya case and called for an independent national inquiry into the sexual abuse of girls and women generally, and abuse in churches in particular. Police who initially told an Apostolic leader they had no jurisdiction in the case later arrested Machaya's 26-year-old "husband" and her parents.

A spokesperson for the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church said the Church did not allow children to marry under the age of 18 years and denied its members abused minors. The founder and leader of the separate Johane the Fifth of Africa Apostolic Church, Andby Makururu, sought to meet one-on-one with the Bishop of the Johanne Marange Church, Noah Taguta, saying Taguta was the only person who could change the church's doctrine on child marriage. By year's end, the meeting had not taken place, although Makururu engaged Taguta and other senior Apostolic clergy through an Apostolic Bishops' Dialogue, according to Apostolic leaders.

To improve the inclusion of persons with disabilities in places of worship and across the country, in June, the ZCC published the "Zimbabwe Disability Inclusion Survey Report," which assessed disability inclusion (infrastructure, services, representation, and participation) by key sectors and issued policy recommendations. The report stated the country's laws and policies were sensitive in theory to the aspirations and needs of those with disabilities, but obstacles included stigmatization, discrimination, and low levels of representation of affected individuals among decision-making bodies.

Although some HAZ members maintained a public profile by participating in radio programs, and its founder, Shingai Rukwata Ngoro, wrote a column in the state-controlled *Sunday Mail* for two years, some humanists reported they feared employers, family, and friends would learn of their beliefs and would discriminate against them.

The Zimbabwe Interreligious Council (ZIRC) interfaith platform, which convened Christians and Muslims "to promote peace, reconciliation, good governance and holistic human development through interfaith action and collaboration," officially launched in November after meeting informally for two years.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d’Affaires met with the leader of the ZHOCD secretariat and ZCC in May. Embassy officials met with the secretary general of the ZCBC, the chair of ZHOCD, the chair of ZIRC, the president of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Zimbabwe, the ZCC, UDACIZA, the Johane the Fifth of Africa International Apostolic Church, Jewish religious leaders, faith-based NGOs, and members of the humanist community to discuss the status of religious freedom in the country and the role of religious leaders in national reconciliation. In various meetings and settings, embassy officials condemned child marriage and urged religious leaders not to serve as enablers of the illegal practice. Embassy representatives maintained regular contact with religious leaders via email, telephone, and social messaging applications. The embassy’s social media platforms encouraged respectful engagement on religious topics.