

RWANDA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of religion and worship. The law requires religious groups and faith-based organizations (FBOs) to obtain legal status before beginning operations. It requires new organizations to secure land and facilities adequate for their activities before obtaining legal status. It also calls for legal representatives of FBOs and preachers with supervisory responsibilities in those organizations to hold academic degrees. The government requires churches, mosques, and other places of worship to meet certain health and safety standards and abide by noise pollution ordinances. The law imposes fines and imprisonment as punishments for obstruction or public defamation of religious rituals.

Together, health, safety, and noise requirements made it more difficult for smaller, less resourced, independent groups to operate. Groups that had closed because they could not meet these requirements often consolidated with other groups so they could have sufficient resources to meet in facilities compliant with the requirements. Religious leaders said they recognized the value in basic infrastructure standards for places of worship but that greater flexibility in applying those standards was merited in different urban and rural contexts. Authorities cited noise pollution ordinances to prohibit several mosques from broadcasting the call to prayer via loudspeaker at the usual volume. Jehovah's Witnesses stated the government accommodated their members' religious beliefs that preclude them from swearing certain oaths but cited concerns regarding the administration of certain government-funded religious schools seeking to force members' children to participate in religious ceremonies.

Religious leaders participated in interfaith meetings, religious umbrella organizations, and interfaith groups, collaborating on public service and awareness campaigns and community development projects.

U.S. embassy representatives consulted with religious groups, including Christians, Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses, and FBOs on their communities' work to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, which took a toll on their finances and limited their in-person activities, and views of government regulation of

religious communities. Members of religious communities were included in diplomatic events and programs, commensurate with and amplifying the important role they play in society.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 13.2 million (midyear 2022). According to the country's Fifth Population and Housing Census, conducted in August, the population is 40 percent Roman Catholic; 21 percent Pentecostal; 15 percent Protestant, including Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, and evangelical Christian churches; 12 percent Seventh-day Adventist; 4 percent other Christian; 2 percent Muslim; and 0.7 percent Jehovah's Witnesses. Several other small religious groups, together constituting less than 3 percent of the population, include animists, Baha'is, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and a small Jewish community consisting entirely of foreigners. Approximately 3 percent of the population holds no religious beliefs. The majority of Muslims are Sunni, with a small number (200 to 300) of Shia, according to the Rwanda Muslim Community (RMC). While there are generally no concentrations of religious groups in specific geographic areas, a significant number of Muslims live in the Nyamirambo neighborhood of Kigali.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, religion, worship, and public manifestation thereof even when the government declares a state of emergency. Exercising these rights may be subject to limitations to ensure respect for others' rights and good morals, public order, and social welfare. The constitution 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 (\$94-\$943).

Under the law determining the organization and functioning of FBOs, which include religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) associated with religious groups, any organization, umbrella organization, or ministry that

intends to begin operations must obtain legal status from the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB). According to the law, a religious group or NGO must submit the following to obtain legal status: an application letter addressed to the RGB; notarized statutes governing its organization; the address of its head office and the names of its legal representative and deputy, their duties, full address, and criminal records; a document certifying the legal representative and deputy were appointed in accordance with its statutes; a brief notarized statement explaining its doctrine; a notarized declaration of the legal representatives of the organization of consent to the responsibilities assigned to them; notarized minutes of the group's general assembly that established the organization, approved its statutes, and appointed members of its organs; a notarized document describing the organization's annual action plan and source of funding; a document indicating the building or meeting space meets the requirements of the building code of the area of operation; a letter issued by district authorities agreeing to collaborate with the organization; a partnership document issued by an umbrella organization of the organization's choosing; and proof of payment of a nonrefundable application fee. The law states the RGB must either issue a certificate of legal personality within 60 days of the date of receipt of the application or, in case of denial, send a written notice explaining the reasons for the denial within 30 days of the date of receipt of the application. Under the law, FBOs that held legal personality as of September 10, 2018, when the law was passed, were not required to reapply but had to harmonize their functioning and statutes with the current law and submit the revised statutes to the RGB within 12 months of the law's enactment.

Under the law, if the RGB denies a group's application for legal status, the group may reapply when the reason for denial no longer exists.

The law stipulates preachers with supervisory responsibilities must possess a degree in religious studies from an institution of higher learning or any other degree with a valid certificate in religious studies issued by a recognized institution. The law also requires a religious group's or NGO's legal representative to hold a degree from an institution of higher learning. The law states persons required to hold an academic degree shall have five years from the date of the law's enactment to comply with the requirement.

The law establishes fines of one million to two million Rwandan francs (\$943-\$1,900) and imprisonment from one to two years for any individual who obstructs the practice of religious rituals. The law also prohibits public defamation of rituals, symbols, and “religious cult objects.” The penalty is imprisonment for a term of not less than 15 days but less than three months, a fine of 100,000 to 200,000 Rwandan francs (\$94-\$189), or both.

The law regulates public meetings and states any person who holds a meeting or demonstration in a public place without prior authorization is subject to eight days’ to six months’ imprisonment, a fine of 100,000 to one million Rwandan francs (\$94-\$943), or both. Penalties increase if the illegal meeting or demonstration is found to have threatened security, public order, or health. The law states religious sermons must be delivered in designated facilities that meet the requirements of the law, and that an FBO intending to organize a special public gathering must seek authorization from the competent authority.

Under the law, FBOs are prohibited from causing noise pollution. Offenders are subject to a fine of 100,000 to one million Rwandan francs (\$94-\$943), and repeat offenders are subject to increased fines and up to one month’s imprisonment. By law, groups may not use their faith, religious practices, or preaching to jeopardize national unity, peace and security, public order and health, good morals, good conduct, freedom, or the fundamental rights of others.

Students in public primary school and the first three years of secondary education must take a survey class on world religions, ethics, and citizenship. The Ministry of Education establishes the curriculum. The law does not specify 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 government subsidizes some schools affiliated with religious groups. A presidential order guarantees students attending any government-subsidized school the right to worship according to their beliefs during the school day, as long as their religious groups are registered in the country and the students’ worship practices do not interfere with learning and teaching activities. The order does not stipulate any procedure for arranging special accommodations.

The law states FBOs may give their opinions on social or faith-related matters but may not engage in political activities to gain political power, organize debates to support political organizations or political candidates, or use any other means to support candidates for public office.

Every foreign missionary must have a temporary resident permit and a foreign identity card. Specific requirements to obtain the permit (which is valid for two years and renewable) include a signed curriculum vitae, an original police clearance from the country of prior residence, an authorization letter from the parent organization, and a fee of 100,000 Rwandan francs (\$94).

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

Government Practices

During the year the government continued to enforce requirements, imposed since 2018 related to basic infrastructure, health, safety, and noise pollution standards for houses of worship. During the initial enforcement of these requirements in 2018, the government closed almost 9,000 places of worship, and more than 6,000 remained closed. Some groups that closed because they could not meet the infrastructure requirements consolidated to become larger and better resourced organizations that were better able to meet the standards. For example, some smaller Protestant churches with one or two pastors that had been closed previously merged to form larger churches with six to eight pastors, with congregations three to four times their original size. Some pastors lamented it was more difficult to maintain community cohesiveness with such expanded membership. The government did not publish statistics on the total number of places of worship. Religious leaders said they acknowledged the importance of basic infrastructure (toilets, for example) for houses of worship, but that it was not appropriate for certain very specific requirements such as mandatory numbers of parking spaces or minimum sizes for plots of land to be applied in the same way in urban and rural contexts.

In March, the government announced it would prohibit mosques from announcing calls to prayer via loudspeaker in the morning on the grounds that the loudspeakers contravened public noise ordinances. Government officials suggested the call to prayer could be delivered at a lower volume, consistent with

ordinances, or via radio or other technological tools, reiterating noise ordinances equally applied to all activities, to include concerts, parties, and other social events, whether of a religious or nonreligious nature. Members of the RMC stated they were concerned by the move and as of December, continued to discuss the matter with the government.

Jehovah's Witnesses said they did not encounter significant problems obtaining government employment owing to their religious beliefs, particularly those related to swearing oaths, and said the government generally provided reasonable accommodations to individuals holding these beliefs. They continued, however, to state that certain government-funded religious schools sought to force Jehovah's Witnesses' families to participate in religious ceremonies contrary to their beliefs and laws guaranteeing freedom of worship. This in some cases resulted in conflict and the expulsion or voluntary departure of students from the schools. Jehovah's Witnesses reported this caused an undue financial burden on their communities, as 25 students had to enroll as boarders in more distant schools or pay higher tuition fees, and 16 students remained out of school.

Religious leaders said the government pressured them to refrain from making statements in conflict with government policies. For example, some religious leaders who minimized the danger of the COVID-19 pandemic or discouraged their communities from accessing COVID-19 vaccines were warned not to do so.

Muslim community leaders stated they maintained a collaborative relationship with the Rwanda National Police to counter violent extremism related to religion. These efforts included youth and community outreach, cautioning community members about extremist recruitment efforts, countering violent extremism with messages of peace and inclusion, and urging cooperation with law enforcement.

There were reports the government consistently monitored the internal leadership affairs of religious organizations so it could intervene in their processes if they were poised to take any actions that the government viewed as contrary to the country's laws, policies, or interests. Some religious leaders objected to what they believed constituted inappropriate interference in religious organizations' governance. Some religious leaders and members of religious communities, as well as many members of the public, said the government needed to prevent the formation of, or intervene in, organizations that were religious in name only,

functioning as de facto schemes for charismatic, individual leaders to extract financial support from poor and sometimes less educated citizens, while providing no substantial social support or faith community. Independent religious groups continued to face difficulties establishing themselves because many requirements for obtaining official registration – for example, purchasing or renting property – were difficult to fulfill for groups that did not already have legal status or significant financial means.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious leaders said numerous religious groups and associations contributed to greater religious understanding and tolerance by participating in interfaith activities and collaborating on public awareness campaigns and community development projects. During the year, the Rwanda Interfaith Council, an organization comprising umbrella organizations representing all major faith communities, including Catholics, Anglicans, Muslims, and Protestants, convened interfaith communities and coordinated their cooperation with one another and with the government on topics such as compliance with various health, safety, and infrastructure requirements. They also jointly carried out campaigns to prevent sexual and gender-based violence and support early childhood development in their communities.

Observers said religious organizations continued to play a crucial role in meeting the humanitarian needs of poor and vulnerable citizens.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy representatives continued to engage with the government, including the RGB (the public regulator of the civil society sector) and foreign affairs and law enforcement officials, on the importance of maintaining a collaborative and respectful relationship with civil society and religious organizations, guaranteeing their rights as the government formulated and enforced regulations that applied to those organizations. Embassy representatives emphasized the positive contributions these groups provided and the importance of allowing them to freely organize themselves, exercise religious freedom, and participate in community activities, both as a matter of principle and in view of their important role advocating honest, effective governance.

Embassy representatives urged government officials to ensure regulations relevant to religious organizations were applied in a transparent, fair manner and always in consultation with those organizations themselves.

Embassy representatives consulted with religious groups and FBOs (including Jehovah's Witnesses and other Christians and Muslims) on the well-being of their communities and how they were managing to meet government requirements for their operations.

The embassy included religious community leaders in representational events throughout the year, emphasizing the importance of their voices in civil discourse.