

BURUNDI 2016 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 exchanged words publicly that implicitly or explicitly criticized the other. In March the media reported the National Assembly President accused the Catholic Church of playing a “purely political, not spiritual role” and said the government would not talk to “sponsors of terrorism.” Several months later the National Assembly president publicly sought a rapprochement with the Church. In June the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Burundi issued a message that suggested ways to resolve the political crisis that followed the president’s controversial bid for a third term in 2015; in response, the ruling party issued a strong counterstatement. All of the followers of a woman who reported experiencing visitations from the Virgin Mary were released from custody by the end of the year. Three local priests who fled the country in April 2015 following anonymous death threats accusing them of supporting an insurgency against the government had not returned at year’s end.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy continued to engage with actors representing various religions and encourage broad based religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.1 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2008 national census, 62 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 21.6 Protestant, 2.5 Muslim, and 2.3 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 (COMIBU) estimates Muslims constitute closer to 10-12 percent of the population. Most Muslims are Sunni. There are some Shia Muslims and also a small Ismaili community. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent 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 its law covering nonprofit organizations, which states these organizations must register with the Ministry of Interior. 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. 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.

According to the Ministry of Education, the official education program includes religion and morality classes in the curriculum for all secondary and primary schools. The program offers religious classes 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 March media sources reported President of the National Assembly Pascal Nyabenda accused the Catholic Church of playing a “purely political, not spiritual role” and said the government would not talk to “sponsors of terrorism.” A representative of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa denied the Church was sponsoring violence and said government critics should not be deemed “terrorists.” In November Nyabenda publicly sought a rapprochement with the Church, appearing before thousands of church-goers in Bujumbura and asking for the Church’s assistance in engaging with international donors to encourage them to provide assistance to the country. He also asked the Church to support the government’s efforts to repatriate refugees.

In June the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Burundi (CCBB) issued a message read in all churches that expressed compassion for what they said were those who were suffering as a result of President Pierre Nkurunziza’s bid for a third term in 2015 and suggested ways forward. The CCBB characterized the president’s third term as a political crisis in the wake of killings, property destruction, thefts, exile, and economic deterioration. Their suggestions included ways to resolve the political crisis. The ruling party issued a counterstatement, which Catholic Church officials stated they perceived as an attempt to deter the Church from preaching freely on sensitive issues.

All of Eusebie Ngendakumana’s followers detained in prison were released after varying lengths of time in custody, according to Ngendakumana’s lawyer. Ngendakumana was accused of leading an unrecognized cult that formed after she reported seeing visions of the Virgin Mary in 2013. She was, however, never formally charged with any crime. Forty of her followers were convicted of rebellion against administrative orders and sentenced to prison from six months to five years. According to their lawyer, a number of those convicted were freed before the expiration of their sentences if they pledged to refrain from going on a pilgrimage to the location where the Virgin Mary was said to appear. Ngendakumana reportedly fled to the Democratic Republic of the Congo with many of her followers in 2015.

A Catholic representative reported the University of Burundi chaplain and two other priests who fled the country in April 2015 had not returned as of the end of the year. The three fled after receiving anonymous death threats accusing them of supporting an insurgency against the government. The chaplain provided moral support to, and helped identify temporary shelter for, approximately 600 university students who sought refuge outside the U.S. embassy in April 2015 after

authorities closed the university (including their housing) amid protests and violence related to the president's re-election bid.

The government administration comprised both Christian and Muslim officials. The president was a Protestant while several prominent members of his cabinet were Catholic or Muslim.

Government benefits – such as tax waivers – were granted to religious groups for the acquisition of materials to manage development projects. According to the Burundi Revenue Authority, the Catholic Church was granted a tax waiver in August for the import of a car for one of its seminaries and another tax waiver was granted in October for construction materials for Office of the Development of the Archdiocese of Gitega, one of the Church's development agencies.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy continued to encourage and support broad based religious tolerance and dialogue.

The embassy encouraged societal leaders to support religious tolerance and promote interfaith discussion of the collaborative role religious groups could play in disseminating a message of peace and tolerance to the population.