



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **91.6%**
- Muslims : **4.9%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **3.1%**
- Others : **0.4%**

11.883.000

26.338 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The constitution of Rwanda, promulgated in 2003 and most recently amended in 2015, states, in article 37: “Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, worship and public manifestation thereof is guaranteed by the state in accordance with the law.”^[1] Article 57 prohibits the setting up of political organisations that are based “on race, ethnic group, tribe, lineage, region, sex, religion or any other division which may lead to discrimination”.

Under the new Penal Code of May 2012,^[2] disrupting a religious service (article 277) is punishable by between eight days and three months in prison and fines of between 20,000 and 300,000 Rwandan francs. The Penal Code also imposes fines on anyone who “publicly humiliates rites, symbols or objects of religion” (article 278), or insults, threatens or physically assaults a religious leader (article 279). Government policy allows individuals to express their religious (but not ethnic) identity through choice of headdress in official photos for passports, driver’s licences, and other official documents.

Under a new law governing religious groups, promulgated in 2012 (Law 06/2012, published in the Official Journal of the Republic of Rwanda), all groups “whose members share the same beliefs, cult, and practice” must register with the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) to acquire legal status. Unregistered groups need permission to organise religious activities. This is not required for religious groups which are already registered!^[3] According to a number of religious leaders who were consulted (Catholic, Protestant and Muslim), there are no restrictions for officially recognised religious groups carrying out pastoral activities, catechising, building places of worship, owning and running media (particularly radios) and fundraising inside and outside the country.

All students in public primary school and the first three years of secondary education must take a religion class that covers various religions. Parents can enrol their children in private religious schools.

The law covering religious groups does not include non-governmental organisations (NGOs) associated with religious groups. Domestic NGOs associated with religious groups are required to register with the RGB, but under a different law governing NGOs. The law details a multi-step NGO registration process and requires annual financial and activity reports and action plans.

The government only recognises civil marriages.

| Incidents

In July 2017 a Rwandan citizen by the name of Marerimana Herman filed a lawsuit against Archbishop Thaddée Ntuhinyurwa of Kigali, charging him with alleged criminal offences: being the head of an organisation which supposedly suppressed Rwanda's traditional religion, and recognising the Marian apparitions in Kibeho. He claimed this contravened article 36 of the Rwandan constitution, which recognises "the right to promote [the] National Culture"^[4] The court accepted to hear the case.^[5] This incident prompted widespread concern among Catholics. Some religious and lay leaders privately described the accusations as strange and unusual, suggesting that some political interests might be behind Mr Marerimana's action. Finally, after hearing the archbishop's lawyers, the court decided to dismiss the case.^[6]

There were more tensions between the Catholic Church and the government in mid-December 2017 after the authorities announced a plan to distribute condoms to young women. It formed part of a campaign launched by the Ministry of Health aimed at reducing the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases. Catholic Bishop Servilien Nzakamwita of Byumba reacted by describing the campaign as "a licence for teenagers to fornicate" and as responsible for the increase in pregnancies. Rwanda's Minister of Health, Diane Gashumba, responded by saying that the bishop's statement was completely out of context and that it showed a lack of understanding as regards the health problem the Government was trying to address.^[7] Notwithstanding this, no government authority seems to have tried to prevent religious leaders and members of the clergy from discussing their religious ideas in public.

In January 2017, it was reported that the Rwanda National Police (RNP) shot and killed an imam who was in custody in Kigali. In August of the same year, four other Muslims were shot dead by RNP officers in Bugarama. In both cases, the police said that they were suspected of having links to Islamic terrorist groups.^[8]

In late February 2018, it was reported that about 700 small Pentecostal churches were closed down. The authorities said that they had failed to comply with building and noise pollution regulations. Reportedly, some of them were reopened after they were approved by inspectors.^[9]

| Prospects for freedom of religion

After President Paul Kagame's visit to the Vatican on 20th March 2017, high-ranking government officials showed restraint in speaking about the Catholic Church over its alleged role in the 1994 genocide. During the meeting, Pope Francis "conveyed his profound sadness, and that of the Holy See and of the Church, for the genocide against the Tutsi." He cited Pope John Paul II who, at the beginning of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, "implored a new God's forgiveness for the sins and failings of the Church and its members, among whom priests, and religious men and women who succumbed to hatred and violence, betraying their own evangelical mission."^[10]

During the reporting period, it was observed that freedom of worship and freedom to carry out educational and social activities by religious groups were generally respected.

Incidents involving Muslims appeared to be linked to concerns over international terrorist groups rather than attacks

against the Islamic faith per se. These developments, coupled with what appears to be a less confrontational approach towards the Catholic Church, suggest that during the period under review the prospects for religious freedom in the country improved. This trend is likely to continue in the coming years.

Endnotes / Sources

- [1] Rwanda's Constitution of 2003 with Amendments through 2015, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Rwanda_2015.pdf?lang=en), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Rwanda_2015.pdf?lang=en, (accessed 12th February 2018).
- [2] N° 01/2012/OL of 02/05/2012, Organic Law instituting the penal code, 2nd May 2012, https://www.unodc.org/res/cld/document/rwa/1999/penal-code-of-rwanda_html/Penal_Code_of_Rwanda.pdf, (accessed 13th February 2018).
- [3] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 'Rwanda', Report on International Religious Freedom for 2012, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 9th February 2018).
- [4] Rwanda's Constitution, *op. cit.*
- [5] P. B., 'Rwanda: Mgr Thaddée Ntihinyurwa, archevêque de Kigali, devant le Tribunal', [kubahonet](https://kubahonet.com/?p=39781), July 2017, <https://kubahonet.com/?p=39781>, (accessed 9th February 2018).
- [6] Interview on 3rd January 2018 with a Rwandan Catholic priest working abroad.
- [7] Marie Malzac, 'Au Rwanda, les évêques opposés à une modification du Code pénal sur l'avortement', *La Croix*, 28 décembre 2017, <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Catholicisme/Monde/Au-Rwanda-eveques-opposes-modification-Code-penal-lavortement-2017-12-28-1200902462> (accessed 13 February 2018); Agencia EFE, 'La Iglesia Católica y el gobierno de Ruanda están en guerra por el uso del preservativo', *Clarín*, 26th December 2018, https://www.clarin.com/mundo/iglesia-catolica-gobierno-ruanda-guerra-uso-preservativo_0_r1vIcJl7G.html, (accessed 13th February 2018).
- [8] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *op. cit.*
- [9] 'Rwanda closes '700 unsafe, noisy churches'', *BBC*, 28th February 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43225067>, (accessed 4th May 2018).
- [10] 'Pope Francis holds audience with President of Rwanda', *Vatican Radio*, 20th March 2017, http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/03/20/pope_francis_holds_audience_with_president_of_rwanda/1299855, (accessed 9th February 2018).