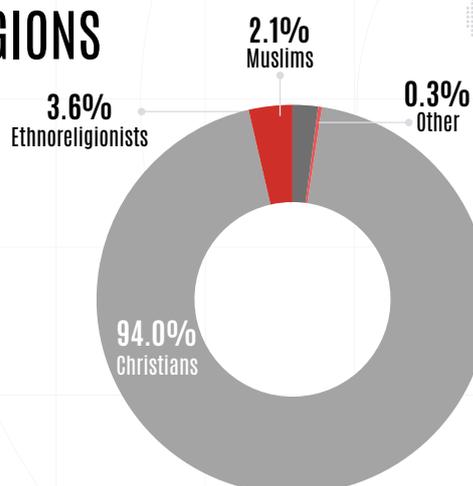


BURUNDI

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Constitution of Burundi of 2018¹ guarantees the right to freedom of expression, religion, thought, conscience and opinion (Article 31), as well as the right to freedom of assembly and association, and the right to create organisations according to the law (Article 32). All Burundians are equal “in merit and in dignity,” with “the same rights and [...] protection of the law,” and cannot be “excluded from the social, political, or economic life due to their race, language, religion, sex, or ethnic origin” (Article 13).

The legal framework of religious freedom is based on the same laws that govern non-profit associations (registration and operations),² specifying that all religious groups must register with the Interior Ministry, and submit their statutes with a list of names and personal information about the members of their governing body. Once they receive approval from the ministry, they are free to carry out their activities.

Burundi is predominantly Christian. There is a Muslim minority, mostly Sunnis, who are concentrated in urban areas.³

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

During the period under review, Burundi continued to suffer from a political and social crisis that broke out in mid-2015 when President Pierre Nkurunziza decided to seek re-election for a third time. While political rights in the country are certainly in a dire situation, there is no systematic abuse of religious freedoms, although certain severe abuses regarding freedom of practice have occurred.

With new elections in early 2020, religion has been instrumentalised for political ends. President Nkurunziza used religious rhetoric and said that he relied on God to make decisions.⁴ In the past, he had said he had been chosen by God to rule Burundi.⁵ In 2017, the government launched a campaign promoting the “moralisation of (Burundian) society,” calling on unmarried couples living together to marry.⁶ In March 2018, the ruling party CNDD-FDD even bestowed upon the president the title of “eternal supreme guide”.⁷ President Nkurunziza died, however, in June 2020, reportedly from COVID-19.⁸

Within civil society, religious leaders from different faiths have sought to improve interreligious relations, although at times they have been strained by political differences. In 2018, the Catholic and Protestant Churches along with

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the Islamic community participated in interfaith dialogue sessions facilitated by local and international NGOs. In November 2018, Burundi's Catholic Church held a workshop that saw the participation of 47 religious leaders from different denominations. The aim of the meeting was to boost religious communities' capacity to engage in conflict resolution and coexist in peace.⁹

In April 2018, approximately 2,500 followers of Eusébie Ngendakumana, the leader of a religious sect known as Zebiya, returned to Burundi after seeking asylum first in the Democratic Republic of Congo and later in Rwanda.¹⁰ The group left the country in 2013 after clashing with government security forces and the prosecution of some of its members. The authorities said the group did not have proper accreditation and thus closed the group's shrine in Kayanza province.¹¹ In neighbouring countries, some 30 sect members were arrested because they would not submit to the health (vaccination) and biometric requirements of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. As a result, the members decided to return to Burundi in April 2018.¹² Upon their arrival, the government provided transportation to their villages. The group remains in limbo and the Kayanza shrine still remains closed.¹³

Violence associated with witchcraft has been reported. Often such accusations are linked to personal disputes or land conflicts and accusations are opportunistic. On 25 October 2018, individuals set fire to the house of a man in Cibitoke Province; he had been accused of dabbling in sorcery.¹⁴ In another incident, another man accused of witchcraft was found decapitated on 5 November 2018.¹⁵

In 2019 there were no official reports of any violations of religious freedom. Relations between international religious organisations and the authorities appear stable. However, local religious leaders have complained that political instability threatens the peaceful coexistence of the country's various religious groups.¹⁶

In early May 2020, during elections for president, parliament and local government, the Catholic Church deployed a total of 2,716 observers who noted some irregularities, as well as a lack of transparency and impartiality.¹⁷ On 20 May 2020, Evariste Ndayishimiye won the presidential election.¹⁸ The opposition CNL party stated that fraud had been planned in advance.¹⁹ The irregularities noted by Church observers included intimidation by officials to put pressure on polling agents to sign tally sheets before ballots were counted.²⁰

Despite the country's declining political and social situation, the right to religious freedom is respected; no restrictions on religion have been reported. In fact, there is reason for hope as religious leaders are working to promote interfaith dialogue and encourage peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution.²¹ Special appeals from Catholic female religious congregations are also encouraging interreligious dialogue in the country.²²

Peace and unity were the main issues included in a message that Catholic bishops addressed to the country when it mourned the death of Burundi's former president, Pierre Nkurunziza, who passed away suddenly on 8 June 2020.²³

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