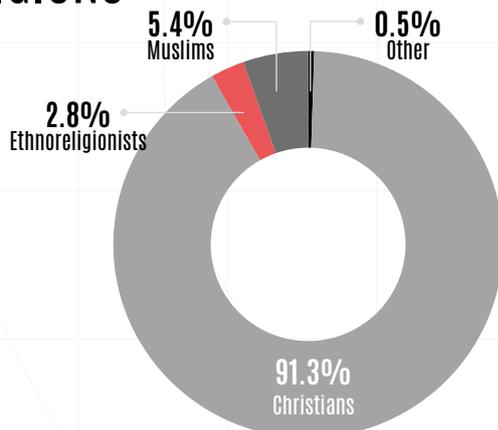




RWANDA

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Article 37 of Rwanda's 2003 constitution (amended in 2015) guarantees "Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, worship and public manifestation".¹ Article 57 prohibits political organisations based "on race, ethnic group, tribe, lineage, region, sex, religion or any other division which may lead to discrimination."

Article 277 of Rwanda's Penal Code² makes disrupting a religious service an offence punishable with between eight days and three months in prison and fines of 20,000 to 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). People can wear a distinctive head covering in official photos for passports, driver's licenses, and other official documents if it is part of their religious identity.

A new law was passed on 10 September 2018,³ replacing the 2012 law governing the legal status of

faith-based organisations (FBOs). In addition to new dispute settlement procedures for FBOs (Chapter VIII), the new law has increased registration requirements, for example, FBOs must have legal personality, which can be obtained from the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) following a particularly complex procedure.⁴

Furthermore, the legal representative of an FBO must meet certain educational requirements (Chapter VI, Article 33) and be "a holder of at least a degree from [a] higher learning institution".⁵ This is part of a plan "to educate Church leaders" and ensure that churches "have well equipped and competent leaders", said Rev. Dr. Charles Mugisha, Chancellor of the Africa College of Theology.⁶

Students in public primary and secondary (grades 1-3) schools must take religious courses that teach about various religions. Parents can enrol their children in private religious schools.⁷

The law addressing 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 entails a multi-step NGO registration process and requires annual financial and activity reports and action plans.

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

After a quarter of a century, Rwanda's genocide of 1994 remains a sensitive topic, and talking about ethnicity is illegal. However, some believe this is increasingly politically instrumentalised. In an April 4, 2019 article marking the genocide, BBC News noted: "Charges of stirring up ethnic hatred have been levelled against some of Mr Kagame's critics, which they say is a way of side-lining them".⁸

Since 2018, Muslim leaders have been working with the Rwanda National Police to fight extremism and radicalisation within their community.⁹

In March 2019, a Rwandan court sentenced 13 people to five years in prison and two to 10 years for membership in, and providing support to, extremist groups including al-Shabaab and the Islamic State. Judge Eugene Ndagijimana said while delivering the ruling of Salim Fundi, one of those convicted, that he participated in "coordinating people in Rwanda who wanted to join terrorist group of al-Shabaab in Somalia".¹⁰

In a June 1, 2019 article, The New Times stated that Rwanda had become an "oasis of liberal Islam".¹¹ This is explained as a consequence of the personality of the Mufti of Rwanda, Sheikh Salim Hitimana, who is said to personify the openness of the country's Muslim community.

In October 2019, pastor Gregg Schoof, a US missionary who headed an evangelical church and ran a local radio station, was arrested and deported after he criticised the government's "heathen practices", preaching against the "teaching of evolution in schools, the handing out of condoms in schools and the easing of restrictions on abortion".¹²

The authorities closed his radio station back in April 2018, arguing that it did not comply with the sanctions imposed concerning a program that had aired in 29 January 2018 that "repeatedly denigrated women".¹³ Police spokesperson John Bosco Kabera also added

it was "misleading the public" and "abusing other religions like Islam".¹⁴ Rwandan government supporters embraced the decision of closing the Christian radio.

Since the 1994 genocide, Pentecostal churches have grown rapidly across Kigali.¹⁵ The closing of pastor Gregg Schoof's church was among 700 closed by authorities starting in early 2019 for "failing to comply with building regulations and for noise pollution" with the government seeking greater regulation over churches, often accused of preying on congregants demanding considerable financial contributions.¹⁶

The 2019 closings reflect a wider campaign in which thousands of churches and dozens of mosques have been shuttered in recent years. Human rights groups accuse Kagame's government of clamping down on freedom of expression, which the government has denied.¹⁷ In an Associated Press interview, Anastase Shyaka, head of the Rwanda Governance Board regulating FBOs, stated: "We are closing prayer houses of all different denominations and asking them to meet existing health and safety standards for their followers".¹⁸ In addition to stricter building codes, government regulations now require pastors to be trained in theology to reduce clerical abuse.¹⁹

Africa analysts such as Phil Clark, professor of international politics at SOAS University, express a wider concern that the Kagame government may seek to limit the societal influence of Protestant churches stating: "The Rwandan government increasingly sees churches as politicised civil society actors". "While the government severely restricted the space of Rwandan civil society, churches were largely untouched. That has now changed."²⁰

At the end of March 2020, the government enforced a lockdown as a measure to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, churches were also closed.²¹

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

While religious freedom is important in Rwanda, concerns are growing regarding greater government restrictions imposed on religious groups. These include, among others, the tightening of control over religious buildings and places of worship, especially

Pentecostal churches, which could lead to increased interfaith tensions in the country.

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