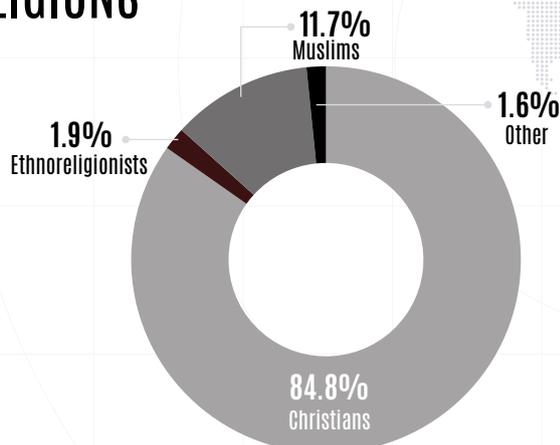




UGANDA

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Ugandan constitution bans any form of religious discrimination, and states that there shall be no state religion. Article 29 (1, c) of the constitution gives Ugandans the “freedom to practise any religion and manifest such practice, which shall include the right to belong to and participate in the practices of any religious body or organisation in a manner consistent with this Constitution.”¹ Although Ugandan citizens can enjoy freedom of thought, conscience and belief, the government can limit these rights with “measures that are reasonably justifiable for dealing with a state of emergency” (Article 46, 2).² It is forbidden to create political parties based on religion (Article 71, 1, b). Religious groups are required to register as non-profit organisations with the Uganda Registration Services Bureau in order to obtain legal status; in order to operate, they must also obtain a licence from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Large religious groups, such as “the Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Seventh-day Adventist churches, and the UMSC” (Uganda Muslim Supreme Council) are exempt from this requirement.³

Religious education is optional in public schools. If a school chooses to teach religion, it must follow the curriculum approved by the state.⁴

In mid-2017, the Religious Affairs Department of the Directorate for Ethics and Integrity (under the Office of the President) proposed a draft bill to expand the department’s vetting powers and allow it to regulate existing religious groups more broadly. The bill was aimed at tackling the alleged lack of transparency of, and disharmony among, various faith-based groups.⁵ It was also intended to stop corrupt and fraudulent practices carried out by some rogue clerics. Many “born-again” Churches claimed that the draft was an attack on freedom of worship, while other religious leaders and the Interreligious Council of Uganda welcomed the new legislation. At the time of writing, the bill has not yet been passed into law.

In an unprecedented move, the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) issued an order in April 2017 under the Maintenance of Law and Order Ordinance of 2006, banning all kinds of street preaching, especially preachers using loudspeakers.⁶ Offenders are liable to a fine of 400,000 shillings (US\$110), two months of imprisonment or both. Some Christian groups saw this decision as an attack against Christianity.⁷ Other observers noted that

the KCCA had no authority to make such a move without the prior approval of the Ugandan Parliament.⁸

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Government practices do not seem to meaningfully curtail the religious freedom of Ugandan citizens. The constitution is upheld according to expectations. Nevertheless, tensions between religious groups often arise, especially in public events.

For Muslims conversion to Christianity is a very controversial issue, and can result in individuals being shunned or even persecuted by their families and communities.⁹ In August 2019, a group of extremist Muslims burnt down the house of Ali Nakabele, a Christian who had converted from Islam in 2018. The attack, which took place near Kampala, killed his two children, as well as his mother and stepfather.¹⁰ In another case, on 10th November 2019, Ronal Nayekuliza was poisoned by his extended family because of his conversion from Islam to Christianity.¹¹

In December 2018, the government introduced a bill that would require all religious leaders to acquire certified qualifications in theology. The policy was also aimed at “enforc[ing] transparency and financial accountability in religious and faith-based organizations.”¹² President Yoweri Museveni met with religious leaders in September 2019 in order to address their concerns regarding the proposed bill.¹³

Brother Norbert Emmanuel Mugarura, Superior General of the Brothers of St. Charles Lwanga, was killed in July 2019 in Kampala where he had gone to attend several meetings. Bishop Emeritus John Baptist Kaggwa of Masaka requested an investigation into the circumstances of his death.¹⁴

During the National Day of Prayer in February 2020, the Uganda Joint Christian Council, a Christian ecumenical organisation, called on the population to pray for peaceful elections in 2021.¹⁵

In June 2018, Uganda’s Catholic Bishops announced that they would establish a Catholic television channel once they obtained the licence from the Uganda Communications Commission.¹⁶ The new TV station began broadcasting in February 2020.¹⁷

In November 2020, ahead of general elections on 14th January 2021, several opposition candidates were arrested under the pretext that they had breached COVID-19

lockdown rules. They were released on bail. Nonetheless, the incident sparked two days of demonstrations that left at least 37 people dead. The Catholic Church and other religious groups protested against these actions. Previously, in 2019, the Church publicly opposed a draft bill proposed by the incumbent President Museveni – then 76 and running for the sixth time – eliminating the age limit to run for president.¹⁸

As elections approached, rioting and violence increased prompting Catholic Church leaders to address a long and detailed message to all the stakeholders in the elections. In unequivocal language, they lamented the deterioration and pleaded for the protection of human rights, for the security of journalists, and for the elections to deliver positive outcomes for the people. “The link between elections in our country and human rights has been worrisome. We wonder how a democratic process should be a breeding ground for violation of rights provided for in our national Constitution.”¹⁹ The victory of incumbent president Museveni did not appease the population, and the opposition leader Robert Kyagulanyi, also known as Bobi Wine, announced he would challenge the results through all available legal means.²⁰

All places of worship were closed in March 2020 to contain the spread of COVID-19.²¹ The Catholic Church sought means to proceed with evangelisation during the pandemic “through radio and digital media”²² and to help fight the virus.

PROSPECTS FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION

President Museveni, who has been in power since 1986, was re-elected in the January 2021 presidential elections amid allegations of fraud.²³ As the Church warned, tensions rose in the months leading to election day.

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2020 saw the highest level of violence in the country in over a decade, mostly related to repressive actions by the security forces.²⁴ Meanwhile, it is unclear whether the bill requiring religious leaders to certify their qualifications will ever be approved.

Although human rights are guaranteed and generally exercised in Uganda, these rights, including the right to religious freedom, face an uncertain future.

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