

UGANDA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and stipulates there shall be no state religion. It provides for freedom of belief and the right to practice and promote any religion and to belong to and participate in the practices of any religious organization in a manner consistent with the constitution. The government requires religious groups to register. The government closed several madrassahs and mosques over allegations of supporting terrorism, drawing complaints from Muslim leaders that authorities were targeting religious institutions rather than individuals who may have been involved in extremist activities. The government also restricted activities of religious groups it defined as “cults” and arrested members who opposed government programs such as immunization drives. In August the Ministry of Ethics and Integrity announced it had established a directorate to coordinate all faith-based institutions and their activities.

Assailants targeted five Muslim leaders for assassination, killing two. Police arrested suspects and provided protection to clerics named on a “hit list,” but senior Muslim leaders expected the violence to continue. There were no convictions by year’s end. A U.S. Christian publication reported four deaths, a rape, kidnappings, and several beatings of Christians by Muslims for religious reasons. Local authorities disputed aspects of some reports and, along with media and the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda, had no reports on the remainder of the reported incidents.

The embassy worked closely with authorities and religious leaders to press for a fair and full investigation of the Muslim cleric murders and engaged with police regarding the arrest of “cult” members. The embassy also organized an exchange program for Muslim leaders to travel to the United States and hosted a visiting U.S. imam to promote discussion of interfaith cooperation and religious freedom. The Ambassador issued Ramadan and Eid messages on religious tolerance and respect and hosted an iftar that stressed tolerance and religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 37.1 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the Population Secretariat, 42 percent is Roman Catholic, 37 percent Anglican, 12 percent Muslim, 5 percent Pentecostal, and 4 percent

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Seventh-day Adventist, Orthodox, Hindu, Jewish, Bahai, or adherents of indigenous beliefs. The Muslim population is primarily Sunni. Indigenous religious groups are found in rural areas. Citizens and residents of Indian origin or descent are the largest non-African ethnic population and are primarily Shia Muslim or Hindu. The Northern Region and West Nile Sub-Region are predominantly Roman Catholic, and the Iganga District in the Eastern Region has the highest percentage of Muslims. There is an indigenous Jewish community of approximately 2,000 people in and around the eastern town of Mbale.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and establishes there shall be no state religion. It provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the right to practice and promote any religion and to belong to and participate in the practices of any religious body or organization in a manner consistent with the constitution. These rights may be limited by measures that are “reasonably justifiable for dealing with a state of emergency.” The constitution prohibits the creation of political parties based on religion.

The government requires religious groups to register to obtain legal entity status. Larger groups, such as the Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican Churches, and the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC), obtain legal status by registering under the Trustees Incorporation Act (TIA) on a one-time basis. The Ministry of Internal Affairs’ board for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) registers smaller local religious groups, including evangelical and Pentecostal churches. In both processes, groups must submit a registration application with documentation indicating details of the organization and pay an application fee. Registration under the TIA or with the NGO board allows groups to access donor funding and allows them to import equipment without paying duty. The NGO board requires reregistration 12 months after the first registration issuance, 36 months after the second issuance, and 60 months after each subsequent renewal. Religious organizations established under the TIA are free to operate anywhere in the country, unlike those registered with the NGO board, which are restricted to the areas listed in their registration. The law authorizes the NGO board to monitor the activities and operations of religious organizations registered through it, including sources of funding. The penalty for non-registration is closure of the organization.

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In August the Ministry of Ethics and Integrity announced it had established a Directorate of Religious Affairs to coordinate all faith-based institutions and their activities.

In accordance with the constitution, religious instruction in public schools is optional, and the curriculum surveys world religious beliefs. Private schools are free to offer religious instruction.

Government Practices

The government arrested some members of religious groups that refused to participate in government programs, such as immunization drives and the national identification project, and district security councils reportedly subjected these groups and minority religious groups it defined as “cults” to additional scrutiny. Government policy defined a “cult” as a system of religious worship, often with a charismatic leader, which indoctrinated members with “unorthodox or extremist” views, practices, or beliefs. District security councils had the authority to determine whether a group was a “cult.”

In January authorities in the eastern Pallisa District forcibly immunized 90 children from the Njirinkalu religious group, more commonly referred to as the “666 cult,” and police in the eastern Mayuge District arrested five Njirinkalu women for refusing to immunize their children. Members of the Njirinkalu group said that the immunization program was “satanic.”

Nathan Nalisa and Peter Kasita, leaders of the so-called “666 cult,” were sentenced and served six months in prison. They were arrested in August 2014 in the Sembabule District after reports they were disrupting the national census, reportedly because they did not approve of counting. The police force’s director of human rights and legal services said the members were not arrested for their religious beliefs, but for not complying with the law and were generally charged with “disobeying statutory orders.”

The government closed several madrassahs and mosques on allegations of terrorism and possible links to the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), operating out of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. According to the UMSC, the government in March indiscriminately closed 30 madrassahs and mosques, largely in the eastern Busoga Sub-Region, during an investigation into terrorism allegations. The government, however, confirmed closing only five madrassahs

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and mosques over what it said were ties to the ADF. The head of the UMSC, Mufti Sheikh Mubajje, urged the government to target individuals engaged in extremist activities and stated the government was indiscriminately closing Islamic institutions.

The new Directorate of Religious Affairs had not assumed responsibility for registering religious institutions by year's end; however, the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda stated it accepted the creation of the directorate and the initiative to separate religious organizations from the NGO process.

The Sembabule resident district commissioner lifted an August 2014 ban imposed on the so-called "666 cult's" activities, but said authorities continued to monitor the group closely.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Unknown assailants killed two Muslim leaders during the year, one of whom was under police protection, and three Muslim clerics escaped armed attack. In total, at least nine Muslim leaders have been killed since 2012. Most attacks occurred in a similar manner, with a gunman firing shots from a motorcycle at close range. The government stated the ADF ordered the killings. Most Muslim leaders disputed that allegation, and many posited the killings were related to a leadership struggle within the Tabliq group, members of which follow tenets of Salafist Islam. Unidentified individuals distributed a "hit list" of prominent Muslim leaders at certain mosques in Kampala, and police offered protection to those clerics on the list and other prominent Muslim leaders. The police arrested scores of suspects, but there were no trials or convictions by year's end and senior Muslim leaders said they expected the attacks to continue.

A U.S. Christian publication reported an account, elsewhere disputed, of police officer Ismail Kuboda, who was reportedly shot and killed by a Muslim man on December 8 in the eastern Kibuku District for converting Muslims to Christianity. A group of Christians reportedly burned the Muslim man's house in response. The District Police Commander confirmed the officer's death, but stated his name was Ismail Mangusho and the attack stemmed from a land dispute and was not related to religion. Police arrested and charged four suspects with murder; four additional suspects remained at large.

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The U.S. Christian publication reported an additional three deaths and several beatings of Christians, including converts, in Muslim-majority areas in the eastern part of the country for religious reasons. It reported the gang rape of a pastor's daughter in Budaka District because the pastor would not stop services. Local authorities, police, press, and the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda had no reports of these incidents.

The same publication also reported that on December 9, unknown assailants in the eastern Budaka District kidnapped three children in response to their father's conversion from Islam to Christianity. Local press quoted the father stating, "Muslims are doing this ... to make me return to Islam." The Regional Police Commander said police were investigating the case and could not confirm a motive.

The Muslim Center for Justice and Law (MCJL) reported approximately 10 Muslim women stated during the year private companies had denied them jobs because they refused to remove their veils, which violated company dress codes. The law prohibits "marginalization" on the basis of religion, and the women filed discrimination complaints with the Equal Opportunities Commission. The commission had not responded by year's end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy met with Muslim leaders, police, and relevant authorities to discuss the killing of Muslim clerics and the subsequent government response. Embassy officials highlighted concerns raised by religious leaders that the government investigate the killings fully and stop the indiscriminate arrests of Muslims and the widespread closures of mosques and madrassahs.

The embassy also engaged with the Uganda Police Force regarding the arrest of alleged "cult" members.

The U.S. embassy sponsored a visit to the United States of Muslim leaders for an imam exchange program. The program was developed by a nonprofit organization and allowed participants to learn more about how Islam is practiced in the United States and how U.S. Muslims work within the interfaith community.

In October the embassy hosted a visit from an American imam who conducted several workshops around the country, with topics ranging from Muslim life and

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interfaith cooperation in the United States, religious tolerance, and tolerance within the interfaith community. A participant in a recent Department of State exchange program also signed a memorandum of understanding to engage in a partnership with the American imam to sponsor a regional youth conference promoting interfaith harmony.

In June and July the Ambassador issued Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr messages, which were broadcast on radio and television, to promote religious tolerance and respect for differences. The Ambassador also hosted an iftar to promote mutual religious understanding. The Ambassador explained the goal of the embassy engagement was to signal to the Muslim community that the United States respects Islam, that there are values and beliefs we hold in common, and that we are partners in building a better future for our societies and for people of all faiths.