

ZIMBABWE 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom to practice, propagate, and give expression to one's religion, in public or in private and alone or with others. Religious and civil society groups reported the government occasionally monitored public events, prayer rallies, church congregations, and religiously affiliated nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) perceived to be critical of the government, but there were no reports of specific incidents or disruptions. NGOs continued to report that some religious officials who engaged in political discourse perceived as negative toward the government became targets of the security services. Multiple church organizations released public letters appealing for tolerance, national unity, peace, reconciliation, healing, and stability while calling on the government to uphold the constitution and protect citizens' political rights. In August, Information Minister Monica Mutsvangwa called the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC) "evil-minded...reckless regime-change agents" who seek to incite the public to rise against the government and "sow seeds of internecine strife as a prelude to civil war" after the group issued a pastoral letter calling on the government to build peace, eradicate corruption, and strive for stability and good governance.

Some Christian groups, such as the United Methodist Church and the Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust, continued to criticize child marriages and immunization prohibitions in some Apostolic religious groups.

To underscore the importance of religious tolerance, the Ambassador met with leaders of the country's main Apostolic coalitions throughout the year, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) leadership in August, and with the Apostolic Nuncio in March. U.S. embassy representatives met with religious leaders and faith-based organizations to discuss religious freedom, religious tolerance, and the role of faith communities in supporting political reconciliation and national healing.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 14.5 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2015 nationwide Demographic and Health Survey conducted by the government statistics agency, 86 percent of the population is Christian, 11 percent reports no religious affiliation, less than 2 percent adheres

uniquely to traditional beliefs, and less than 1 percent is Muslim. According to the survey, of the total population, 37 percent is Apostolic, 21 percent Pentecostal, 16 percent other Protestant, 7 percent Roman Catholic, and 5 percent other Christian.

While there are no reliable statistics regarding the percentage of the Christian population that is syncretic, many Christians also associate themselves with traditional practices, and religious leaders reported a continued increase in syncretism.

Most of the Muslim population lives in rural areas and some high-density suburbs, with smaller numbers living in other suburban neighborhoods. There are also small numbers of Greek Orthodox, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Baha'is.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious belief and provides for freedom of religion and the freedom to practice, propagate, and give expression to one's religion, in public or in private and alone or with others. It recognizes the right of prisoners to communicate with and receive visits by their chosen religious counselor. It stipulates these rights may be limited by a law during a state of emergency or by a law taking into account, among other things, the interests of defense; public safety, order, morality, or health; regional or town planning; or the general public interest. Any such law must not impose greater restrictions on these rights than is necessary to achieve the purpose of the law. Although the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA) restricts freedom of assembly, expression, and association in many cases, the act specifies that MOPA was not meant to apply to public gatherings "held exclusively for bona fide religious, educational, recreational, sporting, or charitable purposes." The criminal code prohibits statements that are "insulting" or "grossly provocative" and that cause offense to persons of a particular race, tribe, place of origin, color, creed, or religion, or intend to cause such offense. Individuals convicted under this law are subject to a fine, imprisonment for a period not exceeding one year, or both.

The government does not require religious groups to register, although religious groups operating schools or medical facilities must register those institutions with the appropriate ministry. Religious groups, as well as schools and medical facilities run by religious groups, may receive tax-exempt status. Religious groups may apply for tax-exempt status and duty-free privileges with the Zimbabwe

Revenue Authority (ZIMRA), which generally grants these requests. To obtain tax-exempt status, a group is required to bring a letter of approval from a church umbrella organization confirming the group's status as a religious group. Examples of approval letter-granting organizations include the ZCBC, ZCC, and the Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe. ZIMRA generally grants a certificate of tax-exempt status within two to three days.

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education sets curricula for public primary and secondary schools. Many public primary schools require a religious education course focusing on Christianity and including other religious groups with an emphasis on religious tolerance. There is no provision for opting out of religious instruction courses at the primary level. Students are able to opt out at the secondary level beginning at age 14, when they begin to choose their courses. The government does not regulate religious education in private schools but must approve employment of headmasters and teachers at those schools. Vaccinations are required for public school enrollment.

The law requires all international NGOs, including religiously affiliated NGOs, to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the government defining the NGO's activities and zones of geographic activity. The law stipulates international NGOs "shall not digress into programs that are not specified in the MOU as agreed upon by line ministries and registered by the Registrar." Local NGOs, including faith-based NGOs, have no legal requirements to sign an MOU with the government but "shall, prior to their registration, notify the local authorities of their intended operations." The law gives the government the right to "deregister any private voluntary organization that fails to comply with its conditions of registration."

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Religious and civil society groups reported the government occasionally monitored public events, prayer rallies, church congregations, and religiously affiliated NGOs perceived to be critical of the government, but there were no reports of specific incidents or disruptions. NGOs continued to report that some religious officials who engaged in political discourse perceived as negative toward the government became targets of the security services. The government generally monitored public events with neither reported preference nor deference shown for religious gatherings. Religious activities and events remained free from MOPA restrictions,

but observers stated the government continued to categorize some public gatherings as political, including religious gatherings such as prayer vigils and memorial services, perceived to be critical of the ruling party.

Multiple church organizations, including the Churches Convergence on Peace, ZCC, and ZCBC, released letters appealing for tolerance, national unity, peace, reconciliation, healing, and stability while calling on the government to uphold the constitution and protect citizens' political rights. In August, the ZCBC issued a pastoral letter calling on the government to build peace, eradicate corruption, and strive for stability and good governance. The letter called the "crackdown on dissent" "unprecedented" by a government that "automatically labels anyone thinking differently as an enemy of the country." Information Minister Mutsvangwa responded by calling the ZCBC "evil-minded...reckless regime-change agents" who were seeking to incite the public to rise against the government and "sow seeds of internecine strife as a prelude to civil war." Several sources, including the Vatican, ZCC, Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, and others defended ZCBC President Archbishop Robert Ndlovu while local commentators criticized the government for singling out the Archbishop, of Ndebele ethnicity, as an attempt to divide the country along tribal lines.

Most official state and school gatherings and functions continued to include nondenominational Christian prayers, as did political party gatherings. In courts and when government officials entered office, individuals often swore on the Bible.

The government continued to enforce a 2018 ban on all radio and state-run television programs advertising prophets and traditional healing, for example selling "tickets to heaven" or a traditional cure for HIV/AIDS.

Churches reported working with Zimbabwe Prison and Correctional Services to help improve living conditions in prison facilities, but the government significantly limited the services they could provide due to COVID-19 lockdown measures.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Members of the Apostolic community varied greatly in their approach to vaccines. A 2017 study noted the percentage of Apostolic children vaccinated ranged from 14 to 100, depending on the vaccine in question. In the past, the government

threatened to arrest some Apostolic community members for failure to vaccinate their children, but no arrests were reported.

Some Christian groups, such as the United Methodist Church and the Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust, continued to criticize child marriages and immunization prohibitions in some Apostolic religious groups.

In April, the Zimbabwe National Forum for Interfaith Dialogue Cooperation Circle joined the United Religions Initiative. The cooperation circle included indigenous, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian traditions and promotes human dignity, equality, tolerance, peace, and justice. The cooperation circle ran a National Resource Center and a platform for members of all religious communities in the country to express themselves freely about national and civic affairs.

In November, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe launched the Zimbabwe Interreligious Council of Christians and Muslims to “promote peace, reconciliation, good governance, and holistic human development through interfaith action and collaboration, advocating for the empowerment of member bodies for the common good.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

To underscore the importance of religious tolerance, the Ambassador met with leaders of the country’s main Apostolic coalitions throughout the year, the Apostolic Nuncio in March, and ZCC leadership in August. Embassy officials met with Catholic, evangelical, and other Protestant, Apostolic, and Muslim religious leaders and faith-based NGOs to discuss the status of religious freedom in the country and the role of religious leaders in political reconciliation. These meetings took place in person from January through March and virtually thereafter due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Embassy representatives maintained regular contact with religious leaders via email, telephone, and social messaging applications. The embassy’s social media platforms promoted religious freedom, celebrated major religious holidays, and encouraged respectful engagement on religious topics.