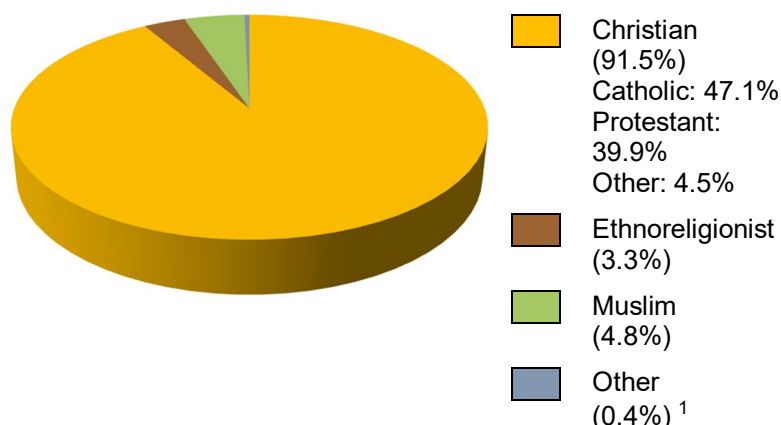


RWANDA



Area: 26,338 km ²	Population: 12.8 million	Political system: Democracy / Autocracy	Major Language(s): Kinyarwanda, English, French
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Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Constitution of Rwanda, promulgated in 2003 and amended on several occasions until 2015, guarantees (article 33) the “freedom of thought, opinion, conscience, religion, worship and their public manifestations, in accordance with conditions determined by the law”. Article 54 prohibits the setting up of “political organizations that are based on race, ethnic group, clan, region, religion or any other division which may give rise to discrimination”.

Under the new Penal Code from May 2012, disrupting a religious service is punishable by seven years in prison and fines of 100,000 to one million Rwandan francs (US\$160 to US\$1,590). The same Penal Code also establishes fines for actions disrespectful of rites, symbols or objects of religion, or insults, threatening behavior – including physical assault – towards a religious leader. Government policy allows individuals to express religious (but not ethnic) identity through headdress in official photos for passports, driver’s licenses, or other official documents.

Under a new law governing religious groups, promulgated in 2012 (law 06/2012, published in the Official Journal of the Republic of Rwanda), all groups “whose members share the same beliefs, cult, and practice” must register with the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) to acquire legal status. Non registered groups require permission for organizing religious functions, a requirement that is not needed for religious denominations already registered.² Officially recognized religious groups have no restrictions in carrying out their pastoral activities, catechizing, building places of worship, owning and running media houses (particularly radios) and fundraising inside and outside the country.

All students in public primary school and the first three years of secondary education must take a religion class that covers various religions. Parents can enroll their children in private religious schools.

Incidents

This official commitment to religious freedom comes against a backdrop of government tensions with the Catholic Church. For instance, in his speech to mark the 20th anniversary of the genocide, on 6 April, at the Amahoro Stadium, in Kigali, President Paul Kagame directly accused “the

French missionaries who settled in our country” as the ones responsible for developing the divisive ideology that encouraged the murderers to kill nearly one million Tutsis from April to June 1994. “With the full participation of Belgian officials and Catholic institutions, this invented history (of classification of the population in races) became the sole basis of political organization, as if there was no other way to govern and develop society”.³

In mid-2014, the Catholic Church planned to exhume the remains of the three bishops killed by soldiers of the Patriotic Front in July 1994 at the seminary of Kabgayi, so that each of them could be buried in his own diocese’s cathedral. The authorities opposed this idea and brought the matter for discussion in Parliament, which rejected the proposal and threatened to arrest whoever supported this initiative.⁴

Another important point of friction between the government and the Catholic Church has been the campaign to scrap presidential term limits, which were included in the 2003 Constitution. This would allow President Paul Kagame to stand as a candidate in the next election in 2017. During the second half of 2015, the President held a meeting with the Rwandan bishops, who advised him against reforming the Constitution. Soon after, President Kagame was reported to have made several public statements accusing the Catholic Church of not having apologized for its presumed role in the genocide. In order not to increase tensions, the Episcopal Conference decided not to make public the meeting of the bishops at State House. Many priests were reported as avoiding public debates on the issue of the Constitution, so they would not be pressed into declaring their opinion on this highly sensitive matter.⁵

Prospects for freedom of religion

The incidents linked to the freedom of religion appear to be related to issues concerning the reform of the constitution and of national reconciliation. Of particular note here are occasions when religious leaders touch on aspects of the 1994 genocide which are considered highly sensitive by the authorities and which do not match the official version. While freedom of worship and freedom of religious groups to carry out educational and social activities are generally respected, it is concerning to note that the government continues to make adverse remarks about the Catholic Church and monitor clergy homilies.

¹ http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_187_1.asp

² <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012/af/208184.htm>

³ <http://www.kwibuka.rw/speech>

⁴ Interview with a Rwandan Catholic priest

⁵ Ibid.