UGANDA

Area: 241,038 km²  
Population²: 35.6 million  
Political system: Democracy  
Major Language(s): English, Luganda, Acholi, Swahili

Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

Article 29(c) of Uganda’s constitution is dedicated to the freedom of worship. In the past, the country’s governments have had a generally tolerant attitude towards religious groups. The official calendar observes the main religious holidays of Christians and Muslims (Good Friday, Easter Monday, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha and Christmas).

Islamic Khadi Courts operate informally, although they are recognised as subordinate courts in the Ugandan constitution (Article 129). Khadi Courts deal with matters of marriage, divorce, property inheritance and guardianship. In 2010, several Muslim scholars drafted a bill which proposed giving these courts more powers, but it has not yet been passed despite continuous requests from the Muslim community.³

In the recent past, new religious groups were formed with minimal government involvement. The official recognition by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of places of worship legally entitled to issue marriage certificates prompted the government to create a register of recognised denominations and religious groups. The Religious Affairs Department of the Directorate for Ethics and Integrity (under the Office of the President) has indicated its willingness to introduce a new policy framework to regulate faith-based organisations in the country. This would entail the government vetting the registration of religious groups.⁴ Some religious groups, in particular the Catholic and Anglican Churches, have already expressed concern about the added bureaucracy and invasive nature of this process.⁵

Incidents

Incidents relevant to religious freedom, or violations thereof, include:

Murder on 27th June 2014: An 18-year-old girl was murdered by machete-wielding Muslim radicals during an attack on a prayer meeting at Chali Born Victory Church in Kyegega District.⁶

Murder and attack on 11th December 2014: An Imam in the Kaliro area beat his 15-year-old daughter to death for converting to Christianity. Her 12-year-old sister barely survived the same beating.
Murder on 8th March 2015: A 16-year-old girl in Iganga town was suspected of having been poisoned to death by relatives after she was beaten for converting to Christianity.7

Murder on 17th June 2015: Namumbeiza Swabura, a mother of 11 children, was poisoned by her Muslim In-laws in Nabuli village, Kibuku District. She and her husband, former Sheikh Mugoya Muhammad, converted to Christianity in August 2014.8

Murder on 30th June 2015: Sheikh Ibrahim Hassan Kirya was shot down on his way home in Bwoyegerere, one of the Kampala suburbs.9 He is the twelfth Muslim cleric killed in Uganda in a period of two years.

Murder attempt on 2nd July 2015: The house of famous Christian convert Hassan Muwanguzi, an evangelist in Budaka District whose conversion and ministry to Muslims have had a significant impact in the region, was attacked and robbed. Last March, Muwanguzi survived a poisoning attempt. He previously lost his 12-year-old daughter who was poisoned by Muslim radicals because of his evangelising activities.10

Murder on 23rd September 2015: Samson Nfunyeku, a Christian evangelist, was killed by unknown attackers and his mutilated body found close to his home in Kalampete village, Kibuku district. His death seems to be the result of his participation in different Muslim-Christian debates with Islamic scholars at various locations throughout the region.11 Mamwikomba Mwanika, the late evangelist’s sister-in-law and mother of eight whose husband converted from Islam to Christianity, was killed on 19th October by an angry mob in Kalampete village, Kibuku District.12

Murder on 8th December 2015: Ismail Kuloba, a policeman who had recently converted to Christianity, was killed by several men in Kadama sub-county, Kibuku District. He was accused of converting other Muslims to Christianity. The killers were suspected to be Muslims extremists from the area.13

Murder on 18th December 2015: Five underground Christians belonging to a Bible Study Group in the predominantly Muslim Kachomo village, Budaka District, died after their food was poisoned with pesticide. The names of the dead are: Katooko Aisha Sajjabi, 22; Mwanje Husain Sajjabi, 24; Eric Ali Sajjabi, 29; Musa Namusongi Sajjabi, 26; and Mariam Kurumu, who was pregnant when she was murdered.14

Murder on 23rd December 2015: Pastor Bongo Martin of the Pentecostal Church Ministry in Nansololo village, eastern Uganda, was hacked to death, reportedly because of a land encroachment conflict with some Muslim leaders. The pastor’s corpse was thrown into a nearby river.15

Murder on 28th January 2016: Christian convert Lawrence Maiso was murdered in his house in Numuseru village, Budaka District, after being threatened by Imam Kamulani Hussein. The Imam reportedly threatened him in front of witnesses some days before he was murdered. Kamulani Hussein was subsequently arrested.16

Violence on 12th April 2016: Muslims in Nalugongo Village, eastern Uganda destroyed the Nalugongo Church of Uganda, completely demolishing the building. Some days before the pigs belonging to Samuel Kijali, a lay leader, were slaughtered during a night attack.17

Violence on 19th April 2016: One woman in Pallisa District, whose name was not released, was seriously beaten and raped by Muslims after she had testified that mosque leader Sheikh Musana Ibrahim had killed her father because on 28th January he had converted to Christianity. He was assisted by two other men.18

Prospects for freedom of religion

Although collaboration between government and religious groups is generally good and the atmosphere tolerant, the executive has made a deliberate attempt to draw religious groups closer to the centre of power.19 These attempts are an integral part of the “patronage style” fostered by the president; he has tried to win over prominent members, groups, or institutions of civil society to his party or his personal cause by gifting them money, cars, cattle, or other items.20 Religious groups are tolerated and given freedom to carry out their activities provided they do not challenge
the status quo laid down by the president and his party. The new NGO Act vaguely indicates that such groups could be declared illegal if, for instance, they "offend the dignity of the Ugandan people"; this is an open door for arbitrary decisions about groups working with marginalised individuals, persecuted citizens, or minorities of any kind. If the new policy adopts the same stance of controlling religious groups for the wrong reasons, it could indicate a change in the trend towards greater religious freedom shown by the Ugandan government in recent years.

Although Uganda is, on the whole, a peaceful country, the number of violent incidents related to religious freedom over the past two years is worrying. There is a higher recurrence of such events in the eastern part of the country where Islam is more prevalent. Some of these serious incidents – mostly violence between Muslims and Christians – do not seem to be recorded in local (secular) printed or digital media, but mainly on websites focusing on religious persecution, civil liberties and human rights issues which provide detailed testimonies from the ground. The lack of consistent, objective news coverage makes it difficult to quantify or even verify many of the alleged cases.

Internal division within the Ugandan Muslim community mentioned in the last report continues despite the appointment of a new Mufti for the Kiibuli faction. The case of the murder of several Muslim clerics remains unsolved, but it may have involved rivalries within the Tabligh community compounded by the intervention of Islamic extremists allegedly in contact with the ADF armed group in DR Congo, near the Ugandan border. This volatile combination is the official explanation for such killings.

The presence of Ugandan forces of African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) means that the country regularly receives security alerts on possible terrorist attacks against public places, such as shopping malls and churches. Extremist groups are still under close surveillance. Uganda’s counter-terrorism measures against Al-Shabaab, the killing of prominent Muslim leaders and the subsequent hunt for the perpetrators have polarised the followers of Islam and prompted some Muslim authorities to caution police and security agencies against indiscriminate arrests, overzealous security measures and irregular detention procedures for Muslim suspects. Some Muslims leaders feel that there is an anti-Islam bias in the country mainly because of police repression and unbalanced media reporting. However, charitable undertakings such as Ugandan Christians in the USA fundraising to build a mosque show that this atmosphere of distrust can be overturned by positive actions.

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1 Religious demography from The Arda http://thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_230_2.asp
3 Functioning Khadi courts are however recognised as social agents within the community even though a regulatory Act hasn’t yet been passed. Cf Khadi Courts in Busoga region to be empowered to resolve Gender Based Violence matters INTER RELIGIOUS COUNCIL UGANDA https://ircu.or.ug/news/khadi-courts-in-busoga-region-to-be-empowered-to-resolve-gender-based-violence-matters/
4 Government to introduce policy for faith-based organisations, UGANDA RADO NETWORK (2nd February 2016) http://ugandaradiionetwork.com/story/government-to-introduce-policy-for-faith-based-organisations The person behind this policy is the Canon Aaron Busingye (Church of Uganda/Anglican), Director for Religious Affairs. As justification for the introduction of such policy the government mentions the massive murder of cult followers in Kanungu in March 2000 where more than 700 people died in a mass murder by the cult leadership. Such illegal and criminal events would not happen if there is a clear regulation. An introduction of the Department can be obtained at http://www.dei.go.ug/religion.html
9 Twelfth Muslim cleric killed in Uganda, TRTWORLD (1st July 2015) http://www.trtworld.com/mea/twelfth-muslim-cleric-killed-uganda-3959
10 Twelfth Muslim cleric killed in Uganda, WORLD BULLETIN (1st July 2015) http://www.worldbulletin.net/uganda/161543/12th-muslim-cleric-killed-in-uganda
Muslims and leaders demand proof as link to ADF claims another cleric’s life, THE EAST AFRICAN (4th July 2015) http://www.theafricafocus.co.ke/news/Muslims-leaders-demand-proof-link-to-ADF-claims-another-cleric-life/2558/2774984//b7wyh2/-index.html


Bloodshed in Eastern Uganda continues as Christian mother of eight is slain, MORNING STAR NEWS (23rd October 2015) http://morningstarnews.org/2015/10/bloodshed-in-eastern-uganda-continues-as-christian-mother-of-eight-is-slain/


For instance, each newly ordained bishop from the most important churches receives a new car donated by the President and handed over after the liturgical celebration.

These divisions go back to a case in 2006 where a group accused the Muslim leadership of real state fraud and thus another hindering factor is the fact that the whole country, and also its security agencies, are affected by corruption issues that prevent them from delivering services in an honourable and independent manner.


Police link killing of Muslim leaders to ADF rebel group, DAILY MONITOR (31st December 2014) http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Police-link-killing-of-Muslim-leaders-to-ADF-rebel-group/688334/2573582/-/10uygs8/-/index.html

An analysis about issues regarding governmental involvement in the killings can be found in Who is killing Uganda’s Muslim Clerics?, LONDON EVENING POST (5th July 2015) http://www.thelondoneveningpost.com/comments/who-is-killing-ugandas-muslim-clerics/
