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Human Rights Without Frontiers claims Rwanda's religious policy must remain under scrutiny

By Willy Fautré, Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (12.08.2024) - In collaboration with the local authorities, the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) inspected over 13,000 inspected places of worship in July and closed about 7700 churches due to non-compliance with regulations concerning registration documents, letters of collaboration with the district authorities, basic infrastructure, sanitation facilities, lightning conductors, safety standards and soundproof technology to avoid noise pollution.

Last month, a large number of the concerned religious communities did not have the requisite permits to operate places of worship while others could not provide the qualifications of the leaders, according to the RGB.

A significant number of the affected churches had minor infractions which could be rectified and their permits reinstated. A majority of places of worship impacted by the on-going crackdown were Pentecostal churches.

In 2018, Rwanda passed a law to regulate the life of religious organisations. A first inspection in that year resulted in the closure of thousands of churches for non-compliance, with a five-year grace period granted for rectifying deficiencies.

During the initial enforcement of these requirements in 2018, authorities closed almost 9,000 places of worship, and more than 6,000 had remained closed by the end of 2023. A number of groups were unable to meet the standards imposed by the new law. Religious leaders said they acknowledged the importance of basic infrastructure (toilets, for example) for houses of worship, but that it was not appropriate for certain very specific requirements such as mandatory numbers of parking spaces or minimum sizes for plots of land to be applied in the same way in urban and rural contexts.

"The five-year period ended in September last year and in December 2023 we called them to review their status and submit staff qualifications and operational plans. Some did not have strategic plans, so we asked them to improve and provide that information," Dr Usta Kaitesin the CEO of the RGB explained on a [state media](#).

In May 2024, the RGB again wrote to religious organizations requesting information about their church locations, leadership, and educational qualifications.

According to the RGB, some organizations were given some more time to meet the requirements and allowed to resume operations. However, monitoring and engaging religious leaders to address issues identified during inspections continued.

In Rwanda, all preachers are required to have theological training and a permit to operate a place of worship before opening a church under the law determining the organization and functioning of faith-based organizations.

Vigilance is needed about the followup of this operation and the intentions of the government.

Legal background

The law provides that a religious group or NGO must submit the following to obtain legal status:

- an application letter addressed to the RGB; notarized statutes governing its organization;
- the address of its head office and the names of its legal representative and deputy, their duties, full address, and criminal records;
- a document certifying the legal representative and deputy were appointed in accordance with its statutes;
- a brief notarized statement explaining its doctrine; a notarized declaration of the organization's legal representatives consent to the responsibilities assigned to them;
- notarized minutes of the group's general assembly that established the organization, approved its statutes, and appointed members of its organs;
- a notarized document describing the organization's annual action plan and source of funding; a document indicating the organization's building or meeting space meets the requirements of the building code of the area of operation;
- a letter issued by district authorities agreeing to collaborate with the organization;
- a partnership document issued by an umbrella organization of the organization's choosing; and proof of payment of a nonrefundable application fee.

The law states the RGB must either issue a certificate of legal personality within 60 days of the date of receipt of the application or, in case of denial, send a written notice explaining the reasons for the denial within 30 days of the date of receipt of the application.

Under the law, faith-based organizations are prohibited from causing noise pollution. Offenders are subject to a fine of 100,000 to one million Rwandan francs (\$80 to \$800). Repeat offenders are subject to increased fines and up to one month's imprisonment.

The law states faith-based organizations may give their opinions on social or faith-related matters but may not engage in political activities to gain political power, organize debates to support political organizations or political candidates, or use any other means to support candidates for public office.

Every foreign missionary must have a temporary resident permit and a foreign identity card. Specific requirements to obtain the permit (which is valid for two years and renewable) include a signed curriculum vitae, an original police clearance from the country of prior residence, an authorization letter from the parent organization, and a fee of 100,000 Rwandan francs (\$80).

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

Background information

The total population of Rwanda is estimated at 13.4 million (midyear 2023). 40% are Roman Catholic; 21% Pentecostal; 15% Protestants including Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian and Evangelical Christian churches; 12% Seventh-day Adventists; 4% other Christians; 2% Muslims and 0.7% Jehovah's Witnesses.

Several other small religious groups, together constituting less than 3% of the population, include animists, Baha'is, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and a small Jewish community consisting entirely of foreigners. Approximately 3% percent of the population holds no religious beliefs. The majority of Muslims are Sunni, with a small number (200 to 300) of Shia, according.