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**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF RWANDA  
FOR THE 51<sup>ST</sup> SESSION OF THE  
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

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## **Status of Human Rights in Rwanda for the 51<sup>st</sup> Session of the Universal Periodic Review**

### **Introduction**

1. The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Republic of Rwanda (Rwanda) for the 51<sup>st</sup> session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

### **Background**

2. Rwanda is a country located in east-central Africa and has a population of approximately 14.1 million people.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 39.9% of the population identifies as Catholic, 21.3% ADEPR, 14.6% Protestant, 12.2% Adventist, 2% Muslim, 3% none, and 7% as other.<sup>2</sup> In its 2025 World Watch List, Open Doors ranked Rwanda as the 64th worst country for Christians to live in.<sup>3</sup> One of the reasons for this ranking is the government's restrictions on Christian churches.<sup>4</sup>

3. Rwanda's last review was held on January 25, 2021.<sup>5</sup> As a result of the review, Rwanda received 284 recommendations, 160 of which it supported.<sup>6</sup> It was recommended by Ghana, but only noted by Rwanda, that the government "[e]nsure that the right to freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed and protected within Rwanda, and that religious minorities are treated equally as regards their human rights and fundamental freedoms."<sup>7</sup> In our last UPR on Rwanda, we expressed concern over Rwanda's regulations that have led to thousands of churches being shut down.

### **Legal Framework**

4. Article 4 of the Constitution of Rwanda states that "[t]he Rwandan State is an independent, sovereign, democratic, social and secular Republic."<sup>8</sup> Further, Article 16 declares that "[a]ll Rwandans are born and remain equal in rights and freedoms."<sup>9</sup> Rwanda's Constitution also guarantees freedom of religion. Article 37 states that "freedom of thought,

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<sup>1</sup> René Lemarchand et al., *Rwanda*, BRITANNICA, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Rwanda> (last updated July 9, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Rwanda: Persecution Dynamics*, OPEN DOORS INT'L / WORLD WATCH RSCH. 4 (Feb. 2025), <https://www.opendoors.org/research-reports/country-dossiers/WWL-2025-Rwanda-Persecution-Dynamics>.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Universal Periodic Review – Rwanda*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/rw-index> (last visited July 11, 2025).

<sup>6</sup> *Infographic – Rwanda*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session37/RW/RWANDA.pdf> (last visited July 11, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> *UPR of Rwanda (3rd Cycle – 37th Session): Thematic List of Recommendations*, OHCHR 75, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session37/RW/UPR37\\_Rwanda\\_Thematic\\_List\\_of\\_Recommendations.docx](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session37/RW/UPR37_Rwanda_Thematic_List_of_Recommendations.docx) (last visited July 11, 2025).

<sup>8</sup> CONST. OF RWANDA art. 4, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Rwanda\\_2015](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Rwanda_2015).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* art. 16.

conscience, religion, worship and public manifestation thereof is guaranteed by the State in accordance with the law.”<sup>10</sup>

5. In 2018, the Rwandan government implemented a new law governing religious organizations and pastors. The new law gives the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) the power to enforce these regulations. Article 23 of this law requires that religious sermons be given in “designated facilities that meet the requirements of the law.”<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Article 22 requires that all preachers “possess a degree of a higher learning institution in religious studies or any other degree with a valid certificate in religious studies related matters delivered by a recognized institution.”<sup>12</sup> Further, the law requires that all religious organizations obtain legal status from the RGB.<sup>13</sup>

6. On March 7, 2025, the RGB published new regulations in the official gazette. These new regulations created additional requirements for religious organizations to obtain legal status. Under these new regulations, religious organizations must submit the following documentation to the RGB:

- (a) a certificate issued by the District or the City of Kigali, confirming that the building designated for worship activities adheres to the legal construction requirements applicable to the specified location;
- (b) a document confirming the exclusive use of building for worship C
- (c) a document confirming the conduct of all religious rituals, ceremonies and practices exclusively within the building of the organization designated for worship activities;
- (d) documents of the legal representative of the organization and his or her deputy required by laws. If such documents were issued abroad, they are channeled [sic] through the Rwandan Embassy located in the country of issuance and authenticated by the Ministry in charge of foreign affairs in Rwanda to ensure their validity;
- (e) a proof of payment of a non-refundable service fee of FRW 2,000,000 as a requisite for the legal personality application, paid to the national treasury;
- (f) notarized declaration of exclusive representation of the legal representative and his or her deputy certifying that they do not serve as representatives of any other organization registered in Rwanda;
- (g) an equivalence certificate of a certificate or degree in theology obtained by the Legal Representative and his or her deputy from foreign higher learning institutions, issued by the competent authority;
- (h) an evidence of religious studies completion demonstrating that the legal representative and his or her deputy, whose qualifications are unrelated to

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<sup>10</sup> *Id.* art. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Law Determining the Organisation and Functioning of Faith-Based Organizations, art. 23, (Law N°72/2018) (Rwanda) <https://rwandalii.org/akn/rw/act/law/2018/72/eng@2018-09-10>.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* art. 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* art. 7.

theology, have completed at least 1,200 hours of religious studies from an institution accredited by the competent authority.<sup>14</sup>

7. Rwanda is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).<sup>15</sup> Under Article 18 of the ICCPR:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.<sup>16</sup>

### Religious Persecution

8. Since Rwanda passed its law regulating religious establishments in 2018, more than 17,000 religious establishments have been inspected and closed.<sup>17</sup> Most of the religious establishments that were closed were Pentecostal and revival churches.<sup>18</sup> The reasons for these closures range from non-compliance with building regulations to the absence of a preacher with a degree in theology.<sup>19</sup>

9. Many churches have been closed for failing to meet building specific requirements.<sup>20</sup> For example, churches were closed because they lacked paved access roads, painted and plastered interior walls and ceilings, fire extinguishers, garbage bins, lightning protectors, air conditioning, accommodations for people with disabilities, and security cameras.<sup>21</sup> Churches have also been closed due to not meeting parking requirements, lacking green space, and failing to have toilets located near the entrance of the church.<sup>22</sup>

10. Some of the requirements appear to be arbitrary, and it appears the government has used its regulations to close churches it does not like or agree with. The RGB has expressed concern about churches and pastors exploiting their congregations for money and goods.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Regulations of the Chief Executive Officer of Rwanda Governance Board Relating to Additional Requirements for Faith-Based Organizations (N° 01/2025/2025) art. 3, <https://www.rgb.rw/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=120621&token=48218a27183ee828b80536211e9d34bf932b921e>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ratification Status for Rwanda*, OHCHR,

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/treaty.aspx](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/treaty.aspx) (last visited July 11, 2025).

<sup>16</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 18, *adopted* Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

<sup>17</sup> Morgan Lee, *Rwanda Explains Why It Closed Thousands of Churches. Again.*, CHRISTIANITY TODAY (Aug. 29, 2024), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/08/rwanda-closed-churches-africa/>.

<sup>18</sup> *Rwanda Government Closes More Than 8,000 Places of Worship*, ANGLICAN INK (Sep. 23, 2024), <https://anglican.ink/2024/09/23/rwanda-government-closes-more-than-8000-places-of-worship/>.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> Lee, *supra* note 17.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> *Rwanda Government Closes More Than 8,000 Places of Worship*, *supra* note 18.

It claims that the regulations are in place to protect people from what they deem as “fraudulent” churches.<sup>24</sup> President Kagame also expressed concern over “mushrooming churches” that he claims “squeeze even the last penny from poor Rwandans.”<sup>25</sup>

11. In July 2024, the RGB began cracking down on religious establishments that were in violation of the regulations. As a result of this crackdown, 14,000 religious establishments were inspected and approximately 70% were closed for not complying with regulations, including registration requirements.<sup>26</sup> These religious establishments were mostly rural Pentecostal churches and house churches that lacked the resources to comply with existing law.<sup>27</sup>

12. Further, Rwanda’s educational requirements for preachers are overly burdensome, particularly for smaller churches. By law, preachers are required to have 1,200 hours of religious studies from an accredited institution. While it is true that some religious organizations may require their pastors to meet specific academic requirements, these requirements should be determined by religious organizations, not the government. It is the responsibility of the government to protect religious freedom, not dictate who is and who is not allowed to be a preacher.

13. We are concerned that Rwanda has enacted stricter regulations governing religious organizations since its last UPR. These regulations conflict with Rwanda’s own constitutional guarantee of religious freedom for all its citizens. Further, Rwanda has an obligation under the ICCPR to ensure that everyone has the right to “either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”<sup>28</sup> While closing a church because it lacks fire extinguishers might be reasonable due to safety concerns, closing it because the walls are not painted is completely unreasonable and has no effect on the safety of those who have gathered to worship. Rwanda’s seemingly unreasonable and arbitrary enforcement of these regulations has given the government the power to control which churches are allowed to operate and which ones are not.

## Recommendations

14. We urge Rwanda to revise its regulations governing religious organizations. While regulations governing health and safety are appropriate, other regulations discussed above appear to be intrusive and arbitrary. Further, we request that Rwanda allow religious establishments to operate according to their own requirements for pastors. It is critical that Rwanda protect the fundamental right to freedom of religion.

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<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> Lee, *supra* note 17.

<sup>26</sup> *Thousands of Churches Face Closures*, VOICE OF THE MARTYRS (Sep. 12, 2024), <https://www.vomcanada.com/rw-2024-09-12.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> ICCPR art. 18, *supra* note 16.