

Rwanda

The Republic of Rwanda is a small country in Central East Africa bordering Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It's mainly rural population is over 12 million giving the country the highest population density on mainland Africa. Rwanda's recent history is dominated by Hutu/Tutsi ethnic tensions leading to the Rwandan Civil War and subsequent 1994 genocide against the Tutsis. According to the most recent data (2013) the largest religion is Roman Catholicism comprising 56.5 percent Roman Catholic, 37.1 percent Protestant, 4.6 percent Muslim. 1.7 percent of Rwandans identify as having no religious beliefs. Given that less than two percent of the population describe themselves as non-religious it can be difficult to find significant data about the experiences these people may face in modern Rwanda.

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
		<u>The non-religious are persecuted socially or there are prohibitive social taboos against atheism, humanism or secularism</u>	

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<p><u>There is systematic religious privilege</u> <u>Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general</u> <u>Legal or constitutional provisions exclude non-religious views from freedom of belief</u> <u>There is a religious tax or tithing which is compulsory, or which is state-administered and discriminates by precluding non-religious groups</u></p>	<p><u>There is state funding of at least some religious schools</u></p>	<p><u>Religious groups control some public or social services</u></p>	<p><u>Criticism of religion is restricted in law or a de facto 'blasphemy' law is in effect</u></p>

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<u>There is a nominal state church with few privileges or progress is being made toward disestablishment</u> <u>Anomalous discrimination by local or provincial authorities, or overseas territories</u>	<u>State-funded schools offer religious or ideological instruction with no secular or humanist alternative, but it is optional</u>		<u>Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious</u>

Legend

Constitution and government

The Constitution of the republic of Rwanda is a largely secular document and no preference is given to a single religion. However, the document does not explicitly protect non-religious people, using the phrase “religion or faith” instead of more inclusive phrases from the international framework such as “religion or belief” or “thought and belief”:

“Discrimination of whatever kind based on, inter alia, ethnic origin, tribe, clan, colour, sex, region, social origin, religion or faith, opinion, economic status, culture, language, social status, physical or mental disability or any other form of discrimination is prohibited and punishable by law.”

— Article 11, Constitution of Rwanda

However, the non-religious would find constitutional protections in the references to freedom from discrimination and freedom of thought:

“Freedom of thought, opinion, conscience, religion, worship and the public manifestation thereof is guaranteed by the State in accordance with conditions determined by law.”

— Article 33, Constitution of Rwanda

Under the penal code, signed into law in 2012, discrimination is punishable by five to seven years in prison and fines of 100,000 to 1 million Rwandan francs (US\$160 to \$1,590).

Religious Oaths

The President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, senior Ministers of State, Senators, senior officers of Rwanda defence forces and national police, senior judges and prosecutors are all expected to swear an oath ending:

“Should I fail to honour this oath, may I face the rigours of law.
So help me God.”

No secular alternative is available. Whether this would preclude an atheist from standing, or whether the required could be waived for a non-religious official, is unknown.

Education and children’s rights

All students in public primary school and the first three years of secondary education must take a religion class that covers various religions. The law does not include opt-out provisions (though nor does the law specify penalties for not taking part in the class). At university level there is a government scholarship for orphans of the genocide and many of these institutions are religious in nature and require religious adherence.

Family, community and society

Though the non religious are technically protected by the laws and Constitution of the Republic, Rwanda is still a very religious population and atheists who “come out” are often ostracised by the local community. As with many similarly religious societies, the threat of ostracisation can make it difficult to provide accurate

numbers of non-religious people living in Rwanda. Recent reports in the Rwandan media have drawn some attention to the experiences of the non religious.

<<http://allafrica.com/stories/201303040084.html>>

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

The new penal code establishes fines of 20,000 to one million Rwandan francs (US\$30 to \$1,590) and imprisonment from eight days to five years for anyone who hinders free practice of religion. While this alone might protect specifically *religious* freedoms, the law also criminalises everyone who publicly “humiliates” rites, symbols, or objects of religion, or “insults”, threatens, or physically assaults a religious leader. Though this law is designed to protect freedom of worship it clearly risks over-extension and could be interpreted as a *de facto* blasphemy law.

Despite constitutional protections the Rwandan government still places limits of freedom of speech and political opposition and this is important to Rwandans in general and non-religious Rwandans in particular. The government has imposed various legal restrictions and informal controls on the media, and press freedom groups have accused the government of intimidating independent journalists. The government justifies its repressive media control by invoking the role of “hate media” in inciting the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The authorities use laws against “*genocide ideology*” and “*divisionism*” to punish criticism of the government.

Highlighted cases

In an interview with Rwandan writer and atheist **Eric Bright**, he related some of the experiences faced by people of no faith in the country, saying: “I remember one day when I went to one local radio, Contact FM, to speak about atheism. The presenter was a man of science even though he was a devout Muslim. People started calling insulting me. Many pastors called to say that the show should be stopped immediately”.

<mysecretatheistblog.com/2013/03/atheism-in-rwanda-interview-with-eric.html>

Testimonies

“In many ways Rwanda is a secular state and this makes me happy. But there are other things that I’m not happy with. For instance, no school can give me freedom to choose atheism in religious lessons. It’s either you follow this religious belief or not. Also, as an atheist I can never attain some of the top leadership of the country because it requires a religious oath.”

— Eric Bright, Rwandan journalist