

Members of shuttered Rwandan churches gather in homes

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KIGALI, Rwanda (RNS)—On a recent Sunday morning, a dozen people congregated in a home in the Nyabisindu neighborhood of Rwanda's capital to ponder their next steps after the government shuttered numerous churches for noncompliance with health and safety regulations.

"We are appalled by the government's denial of our freedom to worship our God," said a woman whose small Pentecostal church was among the nearly 10,000 closed in late July and early August.

"We are compelled to hold our services in secret and in silence. Our inability to pray aloud, sing, and express our devotion to God is a result of our fear of arrest."



Rwanda's President Paul Kagame gestures as he gives a press conference after his final election campaign rally at Kigali Convention Centre in Kigali, Rwanda Saturday, July 13, 2024. Kagame has held power since 1994. (AP File

Photo/Brian Inganga)

The woman, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retribution from security officials, accused Rwandan President Paul Kagame, who ordered the closures, of displaying dictatorial tendencies, warning, “God will punish him for opposing the spread of the gospel.”

The closures were carried out in accordance with a 2018 law that mandates that places of worship meet safety and hygiene standards, including proper infrastructure, parking, fire hazard equipment and soundproofing systems, and that they are safe to occupy.

The law also requires pastors to hold university degrees in theology and churches to obtain legal registration and provide clear statements of their doctrine.

Human Rights Watch has cited Kagame as one of the world’s worst offenders against freedom of expression and other basic human freedoms, reporting that those who criticize his government face repression, including killings, kidnappings, beatings, enforced disappearances and arbitrary detention.

But the government has said the crackdown is not aimed at restricting religion, but part of an ongoing effort to protect Rwandans from corruption and fraud. Kagame, who has proposed taxing churches, said after winning a fourth term in July that he opposed the “mushrooming churches” that “squeeze even the last penny from poor Rwandans.”

“This nationwide operation is dedicated to upholding the rule of law within churches,” said Usta Kaitesi, CEO of the Rwanda Governance Board, which oversees the delivery of services in the East African nation.

“We are steadfast in our pursuit of proper standards for places of worship. It is essential for people to comprehend that these guidelines are designed

to promote healthy and safe practices in worship.”

Pentecostal churches allegedly targeted

A church elder representing the Association of Pentecostal Churches in Rwanda, who also spoke to RNS on condition of anonymity, claimed the authorities had targeted Pentecostal churches, closing hundreds without prior notice, because pastors did not have academic degrees or certificates in theology.

“It’s God who calls people to serve him,” the elder said, “and not the level of education or intelligence someone has.”

The elder said the government has effectively forced the association’s churches underground.

“The closures have left us with no option but to gather in our houses and worship secretly,” he said, noting that security agencies were on the lookout for such gatherings.

“The fear of arrest has forced congregants to be very careful while gathering, to ensure they do it secretly, and pray in low tones, so that no one hears, even their neighbor, because anyone can report you to the authorities.”

The elder urged the government to reconsider its abrupt action and instead find a practicable solution with religious leaders.

“There’s no way a church can fully comply with the required standards set by the government in less than six years. We need more time,” he said. “We want the government to understand us and know that what we are doing is the work of God, and we are not doing it for ourselves.”

Christianity is the dominant religion in Rwanda, with Catholics comprising about 45 percent of the population and Protestants 35 percent. The country, approximately the size of the state of Maryland, had 15,000 churches in 2019, according to official figures. Only 700 were legally registered at the time.

Leaders of several Christian denominations have approved the closures, claiming that the restrictions will protect the poor from exploitation by untrained pastors.

“It’s crucial to adhere to the law and support the government’s efforts to ensure compliance within churches,” said Esron Maniragaba, president of the Evangelical Free Church of Rwanda. “Implementing regulations is essential to prevent individuals with minimal theological knowledge from establishing churches arbitrarily.”

But other religious leaders say the government’s move encroaches on religious freedom by applying occupancy and noise standards unequally.

Pastor Patrick Iyakaremye, founder and president of Africa Bright Future Ministries and senior pastor of the Calvary Temple Church in Kigali, said the government’s demand for soundproofing in churches is unfair when noise from bars and entertainment venues goes unregulated.

He also pointed to unequal demands for adequate parking spaces, which is not applied to nonprofits such as hospitals and clinics.

“It’s unfair for the government to treat churches like this. We have been forced to conduct our worship services secretly and sometimes do it online to ensure our congregants can continue to receive the teachings of the word of God,” said Iyakaremye.

The pastor also criticized the focus on small Pentecostal prayer houses run by charismatic preachers, who often draw followers with promises of

miracles.

“It’s also shameful for the government to condemn the performance of miracles and prophecies by pastors without recognizing that these are spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit. The leaders of the government lack knowledge of the word of God,” he said.