

Burundi Muslims

Muslims make up about 5-10% percent of the total population of Burundi, a small African country. While the evangelized indigenous African population make up the majority, 20% of the population follows indigenous African religions. The Sunnis make up the majority of Muslims, and there is a small Shiite minority in the country as well.

As with other inner regions of Africa, Islam made its first appearance in what is today's Burundi through Muslim merchants who followed the Tanzania-Mozambique route. Having established small trade colonies in the Uvira region in the 1850s, from 1885 onward Muslims ventured deeper into Burundi. The colonial government was partly responsible for the increase in the number of Muslims in the region in those years. When the country became a German colony, the colonialists employed a large amount of local manpower and brought in Muslim workers from neighboring countries, by force or by choice, when the necessity arose. Likewise, during the Belgian colonial rule which replaced the Germans, there was an influx of more workers and merchants.

Even though Islam has been adopted partially by the Hutu and the Tutsi, considered to be the real indigenous inhabitants of Burundi, the ratio of indigenous peoples among the Muslim population at large is not very high. The Muslim minority in the country is largely made up migrants from the Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, and Mauritania, and by families of Arab and Indian descent who settled in the country in the previous centuries. Even though Muslim investors from Mali, Senegal and the Ivory Coast used to be highly active in the country before the bloody civil war, many Muslims left after 1993 because of the security risk.

However, despite the political system in Burundi ensuring religious equality in a country that has adopted secularism, Christianity enjoys a significant privilege. The Catholic faith in particular was used as one of the most important tools of colonization by the German and Belgian governments, which determined the last 150 years of the country's history. Posing no economic or religious risk due to their relatively small numbers, Muslims did not experience any significant discrimination or distinct oppression.

Nevertheless, in relation to their size, the Muslim minority experienced all the same problems associated with the presence of an occupying power in the country as the population at large. Ruled for centuries by tribal leaders, Burundi came under colonial rule in the late 1800s along with all other African countries. At first the country was a German colony, but the rule was handed over to Belgium after the First World War. It gained its independence in 1962 only to experience a long period of political instability, military coups, and internal conflict.

Muslims were obliged to be on good terms with the governments that emerged after these crises and, in order not to be the political victims in the midst of chaos, assumed a social position that did not attract attention. The Catholic Church has played a significant part in the Muslims' avoidance of academic life and the low numbers of educated people among them. This is because the schools in Burundi are established and managed by the Catholic Church. In the past, some Muslim families either did not send their children to school or had to change their names to Christian names so that they could pursue higher education.

Society as a whole, and the Muslims with it, has been afflicted by the competition and tension between the Hutu and the Tutsi, who make up the majority of the country's population. Since the 1960s, there have been tens of large and small-scale wars between the two groups, and more than 500,000 people have died as a result of these wars. The last conflict, which took place in 1993 and evolved into a massacre, claimed the lives of over 300,000 people. Just like the Muslims of Rwanda during the Rwandan massacres of 1994, in an effort to stay clear of the conflict and of racism, the Burundi Muslims did not get involved beyond defending their territories and managed, for the large part, to avoid conflict. This strengthened the position of Muslims in the process of restoring the country after the war and gained them further political and social respectability.

Burundi Muslims largely reside in urban centers such as Gitega, Rumonge, Nyanza, Muyinga and Makamba. The largest Muslim community is in the neighborhoods of Buyenzi and Bwiza in the capital city.

Muslims have generally stayed clear of the country's politics and traditional tensions in rural areas. This has kept them unaffiliated with the crimes against humanity committed by past regimes. The number of Muslim ministers in the history of the country to this day is no more than five.

On the other hand, the repercussions of the civil war in Somalia and the international tension that has been started by the West in the name of combating global terrorism sometimes have negative consequences in Burundi. Security operations that have targeted Muslims of Pakistani descent, in particular, are a source of concern for the other Muslims in the country. In addition to these, corruption and security problems, in general, have a negative influence on the life of society in general.

There are currently no political restrictions in Burundi regarding the establishment of religious centers or mosques by Muslims. In view of the improvements in the socioeconomic conditions of the Muslim minority and the attention offered by NGOs from various countries around the world, Muslims have increased their investments in hospitals, schools and other services in Burundi.

Since they do not have any serious problems with the political institution, Muslims can easily make their grievances as a minority heard by the administration. As a result of such communication, two Muslim occasions have become official holidays in the country.