

Rwanda's Church Closures Raise Human Rights Concerns

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The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) has issued a stark warning that Rwanda's religious regulations, which have led to the closure of thousands of churches, fall short of international human rights standards. In its submission to the Universal Periodic Review on 16 July 2025, the WEA called on the Rwandan government to revise the 2018 Law on Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) and its 2025 amendments, arguing they violate Rwanda's constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and association, as well as international

treaties such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

Introduced in 2018, the law, officially titled "Determining the Organisation and Functioning of Faith-Based Organisations," imposed strict requirements on religious groups, including state registration, mandatory theological degrees for pastors, and infrastructure mandates like soundproofing buildings and providing parking spaces. A five-year compliance period ended in 2023, after which the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB), alongside local authorities, began enforcing the rules with zeal.

Between July and August 2024, inspections of over 13,000 places of worship resulted in the closure of approximately 7,700 churches for non-compliance. The government reports that a majority of churches failed to meet the standards, many due to minor infractions, particularly affecting Pentecostal congregations. The WEA report highlights that these closures often stemmed from issues that could have been resolved with warnings or time extensions, rather than outright shutdowns.

The WEA argues that several regulations are impractical or overstep state authority. For instance, requiring clergy to hold theological degrees encroaches on religious institutions' autonomy to set their leadership standards. An elder from the Association of Pentecostal Churches in Rwanda, quoted by Religious News, stated, "It's God who calls people to serve him, not the level of education or intelligence someone has."

The report also notes disparities in regulation, with FBOs facing stricter rules than non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Unlike NGOs, which require only a legal address, FBOs must own buildings and meet ever-changing structural requirements, rendering previously compliant properties non-compliant. The WEA criticises the "draconian" approach of closing churches for minor health and safety violations, suggesting the RGB issue notices and allow time for corrections instead.

Further tightening control, March 2025 amendments banned religious activities in unregistered settings, including homes, and outlawed open-air crusades and door-to-door evangelism. A Pentecostal church member, speaking anonymously, told Religious News, "We are compelled to hold our services in secret and in silence" due to "fear of arrest." Another elder added, "The closures have left us with no option but to gather in our houses and worship secretly."

President Paul Kagame has justified these measures as protection against “rogue pastors” exploiting vulnerable Rwandans. However, the WEA counters that the laws indiscriminately target all churches, not just bad actors, and that existing fraud laws in Rwanda’s Penal Code could address such issues without blanket restrictions. New regulations impose a non-refundable Rwf 2,000,000 fee for legal personality applications and require new FBOs to have 1,000 founding members, creating significant barriers to entry.

In March 2025, the RGB introduced guidelines on “Religious Preaching that Aligns with Rwandan Values,” which prohibit “misleading teachings” or “false prophecies.” The WEA warns that such vague terms allow the state to arbitrarily define acceptable beliefs, potentially stifling dissent and breaching international human rights law.

Open Doors reports that Rwanda’s government closed around 4,000 Christian churches, and that its persecution score on the 2025 World Watch List has risen to 58, ranking it 64th globally for Christian persecution. The “Church sphere” faces intense pressure, with new church registrations now “practically impossible,” forcing worshippers into clandestine home gatherings and prompting some pastors to flee to Uganda or Tanzania.

The WEA urges Rwanda to align its laws with international standards, adopt more flexible compliance processes, and uphold religious freedom as a cornerstone of civil society. Human rights groups continue to monitor the situation, emphasising the need for Rwanda to balance regulation with fundamental freedoms.