

Rwandan authorities close hundreds of churches

Rwanda's president has criticized the number of churches in the capital, Kigali. There are more than 1,300 in the city of nearly 1.2 million.

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [April 11, 2018](#) issue



Children in front of a church in Kigali, Rwanda. [Some rights reserved](#) by [mrflip](#).

Rwanda's government shut down more than 700 churches in its capital city in early March, citing building safety, hygiene, and noise violations. Critics charge that the administration of President Paul Kagame is trampling on religious freedom.

Police also detained six pastors, accusing them of conspiring to rally other clergy in defiance of the government's shutdown orders.

["The regulations address legal registration with the government and minimum building requirements for operation," according to the *Christian Recorder*, the newspaper of the global African Methodist Episcopal Church. "Some of the closed churches have already reopened after making the repairs."

After the regulations for faith-based organizations were implemented March 1, nine of the approximately 20 AME congregations in Rwanda were required to close. They sought to raise \$12,500 to comply with the regulation.]

Anastase Shyaka, the chief executive of the Rwanda Governance Board, which ordered the closures, said the action was about "honoring God."

"If we are Christians, where we worship must meet standards showing respect for God," Shyaka told the *New Times*, a Rwandan English-language daily.

Most of the 714 shuttered sites were small Pentecostal churches, which have multiplied across Africa in recent decades.

Lutheran bishop Evariste Bugabo said the closure order "does not target any denomination."

"It is a matter of hygiene and security for the church members," he said. "While churches have mushroomed too quickly in Rwanda, those that have met the requirements are safe."

There are more than 1,300 churches in Kigali, a city of nearly 1.2 million people. President Kagame has been widely quoted criticizing the number of churches in Rwanda's capital.

"I don't think we have as many boreholes" to draw fresh water, he said in his remarks at a national leadership retreat. "Do we even have as many factories? This has been a mess."

David Himbara, a Rwandan international development advocate based in Canada, called the government's justification for the closures bogus and said the "real reason . . . is fear and paranoia."

Himbara argued that hygiene problems are widespread in Kigali, which does not have a sewage system or treatment plant.

“Kagame tightly controls the media, political parties, and civil society at large,” [he wrote on Medium, an online forum](#). “The churches constituted the last open space. Kagame knows this. The localized community of churches offered a slight space for daring to imagine and talk about change.” —Religion News Service

FOLLOWING UP (Updated April 23): The Rwandan government has expanded its closings of churches and dozens of mosques across the country with the number reaching the thousands, the Associated Press reported. It has also prohibited Muslims in the capital, Kigali, from using loudspeakers for the daily call to prayer, according to the BBC. The government has cited safety, hygiene, and noise concerns—and prompted charges of violating religious freedom. Officials have also proposed further regulations such as requiring pastors to have a theology degree before they can plant a church.

Some of the churches have reopened. For example, 11 African Methodist Episcopal congregations in Rwanda that own their buildings have received government approval to continue operation, according to the *Christian Recorder*, official newspaper of the global AME Church. Nine rural congregations that were renting or leasing property have had to shut down, affecting 1,000 members. The estimated cost of securing property and erecting a building to meet the government requirements is \$5,000 per congregation.