

Reportage

Muslims in Zimbabwe

Location:

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country located in southern eastern mid Africa. It is bordered by Mozambique to the east and northeast, Zambia to the north and northeast, Botswana to the southwest, and South Africa to the south.

Area and Population

The total area of Zimbabwe is 390,757 km², and its population is 12,973,808 according to 2012 estimate. The capital and largest city is Harare which has a population of over 1.5 million. Among the main cities in Zimbabwe are Bulawayo and Chitungwiza.

The various ethnic groups in Zimbabwe are Shona (82%), Ndebele (14%), other African (2%), Indian (1%), and White (1%). Around 85% of the Zimbabweans are Christians. In the second place comes the syncretic belief. It is a blend of Christianity and traditional religion where people believe the spirits of the deceased ancestors return to the community and have a powerful influence on all aspects of life. Third comes Islam which accounts to 2% of the population.

The official language is English in addition to Shona, Ndebele, and a number of other local dialects and languages.

The currency is the Zimbabwean dollar.

Geography:

The land of Zimbabwe is fertile; agricultural territories cover broad areas in the country. Zimbabwe's geography is diverse: most of the country is elevated in the central plateau (high veld) stretching from the southwest to the northwest at altitudes between 1,200 and 1,600 m. The country's east is mountainous with Mount Nyangani as the highest point at 2,592m. About 20% of the country consists of the low veld under 900 m. Falls, one of the world's largest and most spectacular waterfalls, is located in the country's northwest as part of the Zambezi River. The country also has many hills and plateaus, 75% of which are with an elevation between 610 m and 1525 m from sea level.

Climate

The country has a tropical climate, although markedly moderated by altitude. Rain falls with the wind blowing from the Indian Ocean with a rainy season usually from late October to March. The average temperature in June is 16 degrees Celsius, while in May it reaches 21 degrees Celsius.

History

The history of Zimbabwe is thousands of years old when man settled and lived there. During the 9th Century, residents started working in mines, and by 1000, Shona Tribes established their first city with self-rule. This city was known as Grand Zimbabwe.

In the 15th Century, the Karanga-speaking Shona people declared independence and formed the Monomotapa Empire. They also made trade with other countries.

Zimbabwe came under European colonialism in 1888 A.D. when Ndebele Tribes gave a concession for mining rights for Cecil Rhodes, the primary instigator of British colonization. Gradually British mass settlement and control expanded, and in 1893, Rhodes' British South Africa Company occupied most of the territories which came to be known as Rhodesia.

When gold was discovered, more Europeans started departing to that area. The United Kingdom announced the separation of Northern and Southern Rhodesia. Southern Rhodesia became a self-governing British colony in October 1923. In 1953, Britain consolidated the two Rhodesias with Nyasaland (Malawi) in the Central African Federation.

Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith issued a Unilateral Declaration of Independence from the United Kingdom on 11 November 1965. The United Kingdom deemed the Rhodesian declaration an act of rebellion. It sought sanctions against Rhodesia, and a year later, it imposed the first mandatory trade embargo on an autonomous state.

In 1969, a new constitution was adopted that prohibits the blacks from partaking in the government stirring several wars between the predominantly white government and the black rebels.

In 1979, Abel Muzorewa was elected as first black prime minister; however, clashes and violence were not terminated as he offered to leave the white population comfortably entrenched. Years of struggle culminated in a peace agreement that established universal enfranchisement and de jure sovereignty. President Robert Mugabe has held power since 1980: as head of government until 1987, and head of both state and government since then.

Government

Zimbabwe has a democratic parliament. Under the Constitution, the president is the head of the state and government; he is elected for a 6-year term. In case there are more than one presidential candidate, the election body which is formed from all the members of the council choose the president who in his turn appoints his vice president.

The parliament has 150 members: 120 members by common-roll electorate, 12 presidential appointees, 10 tribal chiefs, and eight presidentially appointed provincial governors.

The Supreme Court is the highest judicial authority in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe is administratively divided into eight provinces and two cities each of which has a capital.

Economy

The economy of Zimbabwe shrunk significantly into severe recession, and meanwhile it mainly depends on revenues of citizens working abroad and foreign aids. At the same time, the ruling class wealth is increasing while the mid class has almost disappeared.

Analysts and investors say that this recession will no doubt deteriorate into a depression as 3 of every 4 persons suffer from total or partial unemployment.

According to UN statistics, the rate of the widespread poverty in Zimbabwe is among the highest in the world.

Catherine Mac Wicari – the Economic Expert in South African Institute for International Affairs – said that the revenues of expatriates are sustaining Zimbabwe to get along. From these revenues the people are fed and sustained. She also said that the status of the private sector is painful.

Mugabe's participation from 1998 to 2002 in the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo set the stage for this deterioration by draining the country of hundreds of millions of dollars.

In 2000, Mugabe began to forcibly confiscate and redistribute most of the Whites' land with no compensation under the pretext of achieving equality and justice between the rich White minority and poor Black majority.

This procedure led to mounting chaos and 40% shrinkage in the GDP over eight years. Hyperinflation has been a major problem, when the country suspended its own currency. Zimbabwe faced 231 million percent peak hyperinflation in 2008.

The Zimbabwean economy depends mainly on agriculture. Then come mining and industry. 60% of the labor force works in agriculture. The main crops are: maize, wheat, rice, cotton, sugar cane. Modern industry has started to find way in Zimbabwe especially after building Kariba Dam; hence were manufacturing industry, food industry, iron, and weaving and producing cotton. Industry is spread along the railway from Bulawayo to Salisbury.

Tourism

One of the most spectacular touristic sites in Zimbabwe is Victoria Falls, which boosts the touristic sector in Zimbabwe. Shared with Zambia, these falls attract visitors who come to enjoy the beauty of the largest falls in the world – also recognized as one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World.

African Savannah navigation also draws the attraction of tourists who are offered tours in four-wheel drive vehicles to closely view the African elephants – these enormous creatures and one of the Big Fives - moving freely in the jungle. Despite the risk of such trips, tourists do not hesitate to enjoy plentiful action.

Another touristic attraction is the Matobo Hills – an area of granite kopjes and wooded valleys commencing some 200 miles south of the capital Harare. The Hills were formed with granite, and they have become famous and a tourist attraction due to their ancient shapes and local wildlife.

Zimbabwe is also a paradise for hunters. Groups of amateur and experts set off for these hunting areas for an African adventure of the very best kind. However, these hunting trips are subject to strict laws that prohibit hunting endangered species or uneatable animals.

History of Islam

The arrival of Islam in Zimbabwe took place at two stages: the first stage is before the coming of the Europeans to that country, and the second stage is following their onset.

As for the first stage, researches differ over specifying the exact date of the arrival of Islam in Zimbabwe. Some records date their arrival to the First Hijri Century, others to the fourth, and still others to the era from the 10th and the 16th.

However, it may be said that it is most likely that Islam entered Zimbabwe in the First Hijri Century, meaning that Muslims arrived early in that country, and this is asserted through several points:

Professor Stanley Timbor reported that he discovered a tomb in Zimbabwe with the following words carved on it: “In The Name of Allah, The Compassionate, The Most Merciful. There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is His Messenger. This is the grave of Salam bin Saleh who left this world to the Eternal life in year 95 following the Hijra of the Prophet (Pbuh)”. Ruins for a mosque which was built back in 95 A.H., and stones with Quranic verses carved on them were also discovered in Zimbabwe. These discoveries assert that Islam found way to Zimbabwe in the First Hijri Century, and this is very normal as Muslims established several emirates on the coast of East Africa. What asserts that is that the grave discovered by Professor Stanley is 400 km to the west of Safalah, the port which was an essential station for Muslim merchants at that time. Safalah was then a part of the Zinj Islamic Empire with Clue as a Capital where trade took place among Arab Muslims who entered the region via the eastern coast of Mozambique. There are records that say that Arab traders played a major role in the construction of Great Zimbabwe. The proof given for this is that there are a number of indigenous people, in the city of Masvingo who have Muslim name and follow culture which is similar to that of Muslims. A great number of Muslims have also arrived since the discovery of diamond in the Manicaland area from north and western African regions.

This gives evidence that Muslims settled in that region, and pioneer Muslims built mosques along the routes they used to take inside Africa. This was during the era that preceded the Portuguese colonialism of east Africa.

Muslims used also to trade with Varembe Tribe which resided in Masvingo Province to the southeast of Zimbabwe. This tribe converted to Islam at that time. Then trade was cut between Varembe and the Arabs for unknown reasons; hence Varembe detached from Islam but very little Islamic teachings were still kept though they view them as tradition private to their tribe. Among these Islamic teachings which they still preserve is prohibiting pork and cattle slaughtered by others. At slaughter they mention the Name of Allah (mentioned by Muslims when slaughtering) but in a deformed way. They also circumcise their sons, marry within their own tribe genitives, teach their young men Al Fatiha Verse which is considered one of the tribe’s secrets, and greet each other with the salutation of Islam.

Muslims discovered this tribe in the early seventies of the last century. Most of its members embraced Islam, and callers exert all their efforts to preserve their Islam.

However, when the Portuguese occupied the coast of Mozambique, they sought to sever ties and contacts between Muslims in the interior and their brethren on the eastern African coasts. They also encouraged Christian missionaries while they impeded Islamic calls.

Later on, the British and the Portuguese contested to spread their hegemony over mid South Africa; Cecil Rhodes of Britain was faster. He established two British companies in an attempt to exploit the region. In 1888, Rhodes obtained a concession for mining rights from King Lobengula of the Ndebele peoples. Thus the area came under British colonialism.

Hereof starts the second stage of the entrance of Islam to Zimbabwe. When the British spread their hegemony over the country, the labor force was recruited from India – most of immigrants were Muslims - to occupy administrative offices.

Moreover, indigenous people were accustomed only to work as peasants and minors; thus the British occupants were also to bring workers from Malay and Mozambique who too were mostly Muslims. Consequently, the Muslims of Zimbabwe may be divided into three groups:

- Muslims with Asian origin.
- Malawian Muslims; they are the majority.
- Indigenous Muslims from Varembe Tribe.

Zimbabwean Muslims suffered greatly from the British occupants who oppressed them, prosecuted them, killed them, and looted their properties and agricultural territories. They obliged them to work in mines under dire and hard living conditions because the latter did not yield but rather made confrontations and urged residents to revolt against the occupants and liberate their country from colonialism and restore their rights. Muslims moved along in their struggle until they gained independence in 1965 A.D.

Among the consequences of the British occupation was the isolation of Zimbabwean Muslims from other Muslims. Indigenous Muslims were detached from the sources of knowledge and education. They were deprived from education as the occupants shut down more than 1000 schools resulting in the illiteracy of over 97% of Muslims. They further suffered from racism practiced fiercely and brutally by the occupants. Their sufferings increased when the British ruler on Zimbabwe revolted against his homeland, and consequently, they were not able to practice their right to perform their Islamic obligations.

Perhaps the living conditions of Muslims started to get better and take a positive track lately as compared to their suffering under the British occupation.

By the end of the 40s of the past century, the Islamic Call became active in Zimbabwe. Institutions and unions were established with the aim of offering essential services such as education and calling for Islam.

Muslims Today

The population of Muslims in Zimbabwe is 2%; they are allowed to practice their religious rituals and their right to call for Islam.

Muslims in Zimbabwe are Asian and African immigrants. They mainly live in agricultural and mining areas in the middle and south east of the country.

Muslim tradesmen, however, live in main cities such as Salisbury and Bulawayo and along the railroad that extends from the east to the west of Zimbabwe. Moreover, the growth of Islam is robust with a great number of converts day after day. Statistics show that in 1381 A.H. more than 200 people embraced Islam, and in 1394 A.H., 14 phratries of Varembe Tribe embraced Islam and changed the name of their town from “Muhare” to Islamabad.

Muslims of Zimbabwe are noticeably active as compared to other the Muslims of Africa what guarantees their identity among the classes of society. This activity is manifested in establishing a number of Islamic institutions, societies, and unions.

The Holy Month of Ramadan is viewed as an important season that witnesses Muslim bustle activities. During this month, Islamic charities seize the opportunity to organize religious meetings and spread Islamic concepts and teachings. Here the role of Waqf Al Waqfeen Society in Kwekwe becomes prominent as it feeds more than 1300 persons through distributing food quotas. The society also supplies the needy with money to buy wood and to cover the costs of transportation from their homes to mosques. They also deliver Iftar meals for families who live in faraway regions.

In Harare, Muslims also organize programs for the needy among their brethren Muslims which is viewed as an important part of their activity during the Month of Ramadan. They also make a list of the poor families in all the neighborhoods of the city to provide them with the essential food supplies.

Problems

Muslims all around The Globe are still facing problems that impede the spread of Islam and further seek to weaken it.

The Muslims of Zimbabwe face a prominent obstacle – Christian missionaries practiced by several societies and the abundant presence of the Reformed Church in America.

The church and Christian societies exploit the dire financial, health, care, and social needs of Muslims and address their needs to spread Christianity among them.

Though Christian missionaries enjoy financial and moral support, Muslims did not succumb before them; they rather sought

to establish Islamic societies that exert great efforts among atheist tribes to spread Islam and its teachings and principles as well as the Arabic Language. Another problem that Muslims suffer from is the difficult economic conditions as we see that the larger number of Muslims live in poverty and the average of unemployment is 85%. Liyaca Yasini – the Secretary General of the Muslim Youth Organization in Zimbabwe says: “These are the kinds of difficulties which we as Muslims face. We are exerting industrious efforts to help the weakest groups: children, orphans, women, elderly, and the retired who receive less-than-18-dollars monthly aids”.

He added that the City of Harare is the most ancient suburb with the overwhelming African majority population. They live in chronic unemployment and deteriorating residences. Families of over ten members live in one-room-homes.

On the other hand, Watson Mambo, one of the beneficiaries from the aids, expressed his gratitude for the efforts exerted by the agencies saying: “We are very thankful for the aids we receive from our Muslim brothers”.

He further said: “We call on the donor sides to supply us with funds to start private projects so as to achieve self-sufficiency instead of waiting for aids which make communities dependent”.

A Glimpse of Hope

Despite the problems faced by Muslims, there are still signs of goodness that kindle peace in the souls of Muslims and provide them with the motive to move forward towards the future. Among the things that foretell a flourishing future for Islam in Zimbabwe is the disillusionment of non-Muslims by Christian missionaries for their ties with colonialism. They also have an overwhelming desire to get introduced to new concepts such as Islam which is viewed as something novel.

Consequently, the sides that raise the slogans of the Islamic Call must exploit these conditions and exert efforts to spread Islam and its teachings among all the people. They also must work industriously to raise the level of living and education among Muslims.

On the educational level, schools with both curricula must be built where students may receive Islamic as well as academic education.

Moreover, there is a need to build vocational institutes in various domains including accounting, business, and administration as well as establishing developmental projects to secure job opportunities for Muslims who are skilled in manual crafts. Furthermore, advanced programs for the Islamic Call must be developed as the number of Muslims in Zimbabwe is little due to the weak Islamic Call; thus efforts must be doubled in this perspective via modern means such as the internet, satellite channels, and the radio.

The Arabic Language in Zimbabwe:

To our very day, the Arabic Language is still facing many problems because it is not widespread though it is the language of Islam. Efforts to spread the Arabic Language are still minor mainly because of the lack of professionals to work in teaching and translating.

As for Quran schools spread in most of the regions, their role is still limited in teaching the Arabic language despite their role in teaching The Holy Quran. Students who graduate from Islamic religious institutes also need to learn the Arabic Language. It is worth mentioning that Islamic institutes are seeking to spread the Arabic language among Muslims to make it the language of communication among them. In this framework, they could obtain a governmental decree that gives the right for every 50 families to establish an Arabic-Islamic school in their town. As a matter of fact, several schools and mosques were thus established.

Shia in Zimbabwe

Studies do not mention when Shia Muslims arrived in Zimbabwe, and there is no official statistics as per their number. However, as other Muslims, they have their activities and institutions that work at spreading the Islamic Call. They also mark their religious occasions on top of which come Ashura and the Holy Month of Ramadan.

Mosques in Zimbabwe:

There are more than 40 mosques and 20 praying rooms in Zimbabwe spread in most cities and towns. Small schools (Kutab) were annexed to these mosques to teach Muslim children. However, the teaching staff is insufficient and unqualified and

teaching curricula are still weak as they do not observe the required standards.

Muslims took great interest in building mosques, and in every town, there is a large mosque that represents an educational edifice where Muslims meet and religious sciences are taught.

The Head of the Islamic Delegation Association Sheikh Adam Macda made a call for bettering the educational standards on all levels through a study he presented during the Muslim Youth Conference held in Botswana in South Africa. In his research, he also highlighted the dire need for qualified imams and teachers. He also pointed to the existence of several African tribes in Zimbabwe who embraced Islam stressing the need to have financial and moral support, establish Islamic centers, and train callers to Islam.

The oldest mosque in the capital, Harare, was built in 1927. Then Ridgeview Mosque was built in 1982, and an Islamic cultural institute was annexed to it. However, teaching the Arabic language and the teachings of Islam remain the primary concern of those in charge.

Masjid Ale-Mohammad Mosque: Masjid Ale-Mohammad Mosque in Harare is the first mosque for Shia Muslims in Zimbabwe. The opening ceremony of the mosque was attended by ambassadors of Muslim countries such as Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia and representatives of various Islamic Centers: Deputy Minister of Islamic Guidance and Culture, Dr Massoud Pour, and Hojatoleslam Sayyed Mortadha Mortadha, a member of the Supreme Council of Ahl-ul-Bayt World Assembly.

The ceremony was equally witnessed by a large number of followers and lovers of the Ahl-ul-Bayt, members of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs in Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Muslim Youth Organization, Fatima Zahra (as) Women's Organization, University of Zimbabwe officials, and Muslim students from various universities.

Chairman of the Ahl-ul-Bayt Foundation of Zimbabwe, Abass Naqvi, welcomed all participants and thanked all ambassadors present for bearing witness to the inauguration of the mosque.

His Excellency, Iranian Ambassador to Zimbabwe, Mohammad Pournajaf, underscored the need for unity and solidarity among Muslims in this country saying Masjid Ale-Mohammad Mosque should serve as a focal point for the unity of the Muslim Ummah (Muslim people) in Harare and Zimbabwe.

Hojatolislam Sayyed Mortadha Mortadha spoke highly of the importance of a mosque as a defense mechanism for safeguarding the youths from the dangers posed by the modern world adding that the mosque should be used as a place for nurturing the youths and bringing the Ummah together.

RelZim Center in Harare: It is a forum for exchanging religious information and ideas in Zimbabwe.

Ahl-ul-Bayt Foundation of Zimbabwe.

Fatima Zahra (as) Women's Organization: This organization seeks to spread the Islamic religion via presenting the personality of Sayyeda Fatima Zahra (as) and women in general.

Islamic Institutions:

Ahdaf (Goals) Association: It is an organization which was established in Zimbabwe with the aim of spreading the Islamic Call, organizing Islamic educational programs, correcting Muslim's false ideas about Islam, and offering advice and guidance for those who deserted Islam. The society also aims at mobilizing Muslims in Zimbabwe.

Head of the Association: Sheikh Isaac Zeus

Iqraa (Read) Center: It was established by Muslim scholars in Harare. It is a place where Islamic activities take place. It comprises a school and an orphanage. School teachers are trained to facilitate Islamic studies.

Islamic Institute in Harare: It is headed by Sheikh Adam Mousa. Seated in Kwekwe, it is a center for training imams.

Scholars Council in Zimbabwe: It is an Islamic institution that takes care of Muslims and their affairs. It was established in 1975. Its members are Muslim scholars, teachers in religious schools, imams, and religious staffs who serve the Muslim community in Zimbabwe. The council had so far achieved constructing several Islamic centers.

Islamic Education Center: It was established in 1976, and in 1977, the center purchased a land in the capital where an education house was built. It comprises 360 students. Then the center established a center for training boys, an academy for secondary studies, a center for training girls and children at home, an orphanage, and a kindergarten.

Kokni Muslims Association in Bulawayo

The Iranian Islamic Republic Cultural Center in Harare: The center organizes Islamic events and seminars to educate the audience on Islam. By the end of 2011, the center announced partnership with the Christian Council in Zimbabwe to form a committee for carrying dialogue among religions and a section for religious studies.

Istiqama Institution: The institution is co-headed by Sayyed Ibrahim Mbache and the Media Secretary General of the Muslim Youth Organization in Zimbabwe. The institute is active in promoting teaching The Holy Quran.

Supreme Islamic Association in Harare.

Islamic Delegation Association in Zimbabwe.

Waqf Al Waqfeen Society.

Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs in Zimbabwe.

Muslim Graduates Union in Zimbabwe.

Islamic Center in Bulawayo.