

# DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religious belief. Catholics reported some violence, including an attack on a priest in Lodja by youth affiliated with a party in the president's majority coalition, and verbal harassment toward clergy members in response to their political activism. There were reports of security forces harassing Muslim citizens for money or property in connection with the government's pursuit of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a largely Islamic rebel group. Religious organizations became more politically active in advance of upcoming elections, and some parishes and convents reported experiencing threats and intimidation from government security services. While religious groups were required to register with the government, many operated without government authorization or interference.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses were attacked by seven people in the Bandundo region, reportedly for refusing to consult with witch doctors, and one of the Jehovah's Witnesses was killed.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives met regularly with the government to discuss religious freedom issues, such as government relations with religious organizations. The embassy had similar discussions with religious leaders and human rights organizations. The embassy held periodic events and used social media to highlight religious freedom issues.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 79.3 million (July 2015 estimate). Based on discussions with religious groups, the embassy estimates approximately 45 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 40 percent Protestant (including evangelicals), 5 percent Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu (Kimbanguist), and 5 percent Muslim. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Greek Orthodox Christians, Bahais, Jews, and followers of indigenous religious beliefs.

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Most religious groups are scattered throughout the country and are widely represented in cities and large towns. Muslims mainly reside in the provinces of Maniema, North Kivu, and Kinshasa, and in the former provinces of Orientale, Kasai Occidental, and Bandundu.

### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and the right to worship subject to “compliance with the law, public order, public morality, and the rights of others.” It stipulates the right to religious freedom cannot be abrogated even when the government declares a state of emergency or siege. According to the law, the government can legally recognize, suspend recognition of, or dissolve religious groups.

The law regulates the establishment and operation of religious groups. The government grants tax-exempt status to recognized religious groups. Nonprofit organizations, including religious groups, foreign and domestic, must register with the government to obtain official recognition by submitting a copy of their bylaws and constitution. Religious groups must register only once for the group as a whole, but nonprofit organizations affiliated with a religious group must register separately. Upon submission, the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights issues a provisional approval and, within six months, a permanent approval or rejection. Unless the ministry specifically rejects the application, the group is considered approved and registered after six months even if the ministry has not issued a final determination. Applications coming from international headquarters of religious organizations must be approved by the presidency after submission through the Ministry of Justice. The law requires officially recognized religious groups to operate as nonprofits and respect the general public order. It also permits religious groups to establish places of worship and train clergy. The law prescribes penalties of up to two years’ imprisonment and/or 200,000 Congolese francs (CDF) (\$217) for groups which are not properly registered but receive gifts and donations on behalf of a church or religious organization.

The constitution allows public schools to work with religious authorities to provide religious education to students in accordance with students’ religious beliefs, provided the parents request it.

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### Government Practices

Because religious and political issues overlap, it was difficult to categorize some incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

In Lodja, several youths belonging to a party in the president's majority coalition physically assaulted a Catholic priest, reportedly for commenting in his sermon on a declaration by the Conference of Catholic Bishops (CENCO) considered by some as political.

The government conducted military operations in North Kivu against the ADF, a largely Islamic rebel armed group originating in Uganda. While leaders of the Muslim community reported they kept in frequent contact with the government regarding the ADF, there were reports that in the Beni and Goma areas, the national police and army harassed members of the Muslim community, particularly those dressed in a way that identified them as Muslim. According to the reports this usually involved demanding money or property such as cell phones, and was explained by officials as necessary to control the ADF.

In preparation for the national election scheduled for November 2016, some religious organizations were more outspoken in advocating electoral positions, and there were reports of retaliatory political intimidation. Representatives of the Catholic Church, which publicly urged the government to abide by the constitutionally mandated electoral deadlines, stated they experienced verbal harassment and interference based on their advocacy. CENCO reported harassment of its members, such as phone tapping and threats by national security forces and unfair treatment by government-sponsored media outlets. They stated they believed this was related to their electoral advocacy and not their religious beliefs. After CENCO published a political declaration called "Let's Protect the Nation," several church authorities reported being verbally harassed by reporters from the government-owned Radio-Television Nationale Congolaise. The government also closed the Catholic television station (RTCE – Radio Television Catholique Elikya).

Muslim community leaders said the government did not afford them some of the same privileges as larger religious groups. One Muslim leader stated Muslims had continued to be refused the opportunity to organize chaplains to provide services for Muslims in the military, police, and hospitals, despite filing a complaint with the president and his cabinet in 2009.

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According to the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, there were 404 Catholic organizations, 93 Protestant organizations, 54 Muslim organizations, 2,352 Evangelist organizations, and one Kimbanguist organization registered with the government. Despite the registration requirement, unregistered domestic religious groups stated they operated unhindered. Foreign religious groups reported they operated without restriction after receiving registration approval from the government. The Ministry of Justice has not issued final registration permits since 2012, reportedly due to the fraudulent use of the minister's signature. In the interim, however, groups have been presumed approved and have been permitted to organize.

Leaders of all major denominations reported their members practiced their faith without interference from the government or local authorities and fully participated in their communities without religious discrimination. Aside from tension over electoral issues, Catholic, Muslim, Protestant, and Kimbanguist religious leaders stated they enjoyed a good relationship with the government, and the government continued to rely on religious organizations to provide public services such as education and healthcare throughout the country. According to the Ministry of Education, approximately 72 percent of primary school students and 65 percent of secondary school students attended government-funded schools administered by religious organizations.

One of the civil society positions on the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) was reserved for a member of clergy. The former head of the CENI was a Catholic abbot.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

According to Jehovah's Witnesses reports, seven individuals in Bandundu Province attacked two Jehovah's Witnesses because of their refusal to consult a medium or witch doctor. One of the individuals suffered a severe head wound that led to his death. On April 6, the court held a hearing for four of the accused attackers and on April 27, the court heard from witnesses and the three other accused attackers. On August 28, all four accused attackers were sentenced to death. One convicted attacker fell ill after the sentence and died in prison. At the end of the year, the convicted attackers appealed the case and were awaiting retrial.

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Some religious leaders reported tensions between Christian and Muslim communities in the East linked to the government's ongoing fight against the largely Islamic ADF.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives met regularly with the government to discuss issues of religious freedom, such as government attitudes and actions toward religious organizations. The embassy also discussed these issues with religious leaders and human rights organizations and used social media to highlight religious freedom issues. In July the embassy posted information about President Obama's June 22 iftar at the White House promoting religious diversity and respect in the United States.

On April 1, the embassy inaugurated a partnership in Lubumbashi with Catholic Jesuit Father Ferdinand Muhigirwa, Director of the Arrupe Center for Research and Training. The embassy provided a number of books and magazines promoting religious freedom and tolerance.

To address the engagement of religious groups in electoral advocacy, the embassy included members of different religious groups on professional exchange programs to the United States. For example, one Catholic priest participated in a program focusing on managing conflict in a democracy.