

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states that the country is secular, prohibits religious discrimination, provides for freedom of religion, bans the use of religion for political ends, and stipulates impositions on freedom of conscience stemming from “religious fanaticism” shall be punishable by law. A government decree with the force of law also bans individuals from wearing full-face Islamic veils in public places. A government-led security operation launched on April 5 damaged or destroyed several structures in the southern Pool region, including a Protestant Pentecostal church.

There were reports of increased societal tensions stemming from the rapid growth of the Muslim community. There were no reports of religiously motivated incidents or actions directed against the Muslim community, however.

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom and tolerance during meetings held with officials at the Ministries of Justice, Social Affairs and Humanitarian Action, and Interior. Embassy officials met separately with Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim leaders to discuss the state of religious tolerance and cooperation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.8 million (July 2016 estimate). A 2012 survey by the Ministry of Economy, Planning, Territorial Management, and Integration estimates 55 percent of the native-born population is Protestant (of which approximately 33 percent belongs to evangelical churches), 32 percent Roman Catholic, and 2 percent Muslim. Another 9 percent belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu (Kimbanguist), the Celestial Church of Christ, Salvation Army, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). An estimated 2 percent of the population is atheist. A significant portion of the population combines traditional beliefs and practices with Christianity or other religious beliefs.

Many residents not included in government statistics are foreign workers from predominantly Muslim countries, primarily in West Africa. Over the past few years, there has been an influx of Muslim refugees, particularly from the Central

African Republic (CAR). According to the UNHCR, 4,094 Muslim refugees from the CAR live in the country. The president of the High Islamic Council of the Congo (CSIC) estimated there are 800,000 Muslims, 15 percent of whom are citizens, which would put the resident Muslim population above 15 percent of the total population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states the country is secular, provides for freedom of belief, prohibits religious discrimination, and makes forced impositions on conscience based on “religious fanaticism,” such as forced conversion, punishable by law. The constitution bans the use of religion for political ends and political parties affiliated with a particular religious group.

A decree with the force of law bans individuals from wearing the full-face Islamic veil – including the *niqab* and the burqa – in public places. The decree also bans Muslims from foreign countries from spending the night in mosques. According to the government and the CSIC, both measures are designed to provide greater security against the threat of terrorist acts. The CSIC notifies the government when it knows of Muslims traveling out of country to participate in religious education or for activities sponsored by the CSIC.

All organizations, including religious groups, must register with and be approved by the Ministry of Interior. Religious group applicants must present a certification of qualifications to operate a religious establishment; a title or lease to the property where the establishment is located; the exact address where the organization will be located; bylaws; and a document that clarifies the mission and objectives of the organization. Penalties for failure to register include fines and potential confiscation of goods, invalidation of contracts, and deportation of foreign group members.

Public schools do not teach religion, but private religious schools may do so. The constitution protects the right to establish private schools.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

According to local and international human rights organizations including Amnesty International and a joint UN-Congolese government report, a government-led security operation launched on April 5 damaged or destroyed several structures in the southern Pool region, including a Protestant Pentecostal church located on property of Frederic Bintsamou, also known as Pastor Ntumi, in the village of Soumouna. Followers of Ntumi, a Protestant clergyman, reportedly believed he possessed mystical powers. He was the alleged commander of the “Ninja/Nsiloulou” rebel group that fought against the government during the 1997-2003 civil war. Many observers stated they believed Ntumi may actually have worked with or for the government. The government blamed Pastor Ntumi and former militiamen for raids on military, police, and local government offices in Brazzaville on April 4. On May 19, the Minister of Interior and Decentralization issued a decree banning the activities of Pastor Ntumi’s church due to what the government stated was the church’s alleged harboring of armed militias and a serious threat to public order.

The law banning foreign Muslims from spending the night in mosques rendered some refugees from the CAR and internally displaced persons without shelter.

The government granted Christians and Muslims access to public facilities for special religious events. For example, in August an evangelical church held a conference on the outdoor grounds of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and inside the parliament building in Brazzaville.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to NGOs and religious leaders, the general population, including Muslims, broadly supported the ban on full-face Islamic veils.

There were reports that private citizens expressed concern about the potential for rising tensions because of the rapid growth of the Muslim population, especially in Pointe-Noire, the country’s second largest city and economic center. Muslim leaders stated, however, that they had not received any reports of religiously motivated incidents or actions directed against the Muslim community.

The Ecumenical Council, representing the Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist Churches, met at least biweekly. The Revivalist Council, representing evangelical Protestant churches, and the Islamic Council each met at least twice during the year. One of the goals of these meetings was to promote mutual understanding and religious tolerance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom and tolerance during meetings held with high ranking officials at the Ministries of Justice, Social Affairs and Humanitarian Action, and Interior. The Ambassador discussed religious tolerance and the importance of respect for human rights.

Embassy personnel also met with civil society and religious groups to promote religious tolerance. In April embassy officials met with leaders from the Kimbanguist Church and Salvation Army. In May embassy officials visited a healthcare clinic for Muslims to engage Muslim community leaders. The embassy sponsored an imam for an exchange visit to the United States centered on community engagement and countering extremism. In May, September, and October, embassy officials met separately with Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim leaders to discuss the state of religious tolerance and cooperation. In December embassy officials hosted a meeting with the Muslim Women's Association of Brazzaville to discuss challenges faced by Muslim women.