

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and equal protection under the law regardless of religion. It prohibits all forms of religious intolerance and “religious fundamentalism.” The government continued to exercise limited control or influence in most of the country, and police and the gendarmerie failed to stop or punish abuses committed by militias, including killings, abductions, physical abuse, and gender-based violence. The mostly Christian anti-Balaka militia forces and the predominantly Muslim ex-Seleka militia forces continued to occupy territories in the western and northern parts of the country, respectively. The Muslim community reported continued discrimination, including when requesting government services.

During the year, outbreaks of violence between Muslim and Christian citizens and residents continued, involving members of competing armed groups, including the anti-Balaka and the ex-Seleka forces. Prayers resumed at the sites of damaged or destroyed mosques in various locations in Bangui. In June the Central African Religious Platform, an interfaith organization that promotes peace and reconciliation, held an interfaith service for peace, attended by the president and members of the government and parliament. On September 30, several imams held a reconciliation prayer service and ceremony in the community that was previously the stronghold of the Seleka and where Seleka and other Muslims were violently expelled in 2014. During the ceremony, a local anti-Balaka leader called for peace and reconciliation and invited Muslims to return to the community.

The U.S. Ambassador met with government and religious leaders to discuss the impact of the conflict among religious groups, challenges faced by the Muslim community, ways to promote the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) forced from their homes because of religiously based violence, and the importance of fostering religious tolerance. The Ambassador and embassy officials met regularly with Christian and Muslim religious leaders to discuss their relationships with the government, reports of religious discrimination, and the role of religious groups in reconciliation efforts. The U.S. government continued to fund a consortium formed to build up the capacity of the Central African Religious Platform, led by leaders of the Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant communities, and played a high-profile role in promoting social cohesion.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.6 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the Pew Research Foundation, the population is 61 percent Protestant, 28 percent Roman Catholic, and 9 percent Muslim. Other religious groups, including traditional religious groups and those having no religious beliefs, make up an estimated 2 percent of the population. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Oxfam estimates the percentage of Muslims at up to 15 percent. Some Christians and Muslims incorporate aspects of indigenous beliefs into their religious practices.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion under conditions set by law and equal protection under the law regardless of religion. It prohibits all forms of religious intolerance and “religious fundamentalism,” which is not defined in law. It specifies an oath of office for the head of state made “before God” that includes a promise to fulfill the duties of the office without any consideration of religion.

Religious groups, except for indigenous religious groups, are required to register with the Ministry of the Interior, Public Security, and Territorial Administration. To register, religious groups must prove they have a minimum of 1,000 members and their leaders have adequate religious education, as judged by the ministry.

The law permits the ministry to deny registration to any religious group it deems offensive to public morals or likely to disturb social peace, and to suspend the operation of registered religious groups if it finds their activities subversive. Registration is free and confers official recognition and certain benefits, such as customs duty exemptions for vehicles or equipment. There are no penalties prescribed for groups that fail to register.

The law does not prohibit religious instruction in public or private schools, but it is not part of the public school curriculum.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

According to media reports and religious and civil society leaders, civilian authorities failed to maintain effective control over the security forces, a situation that has persisted for a number of years. Human rights organizations stated the government again failed to take steps to investigate and prosecute officials who committed abuses that targeted members of various religious groups. These individuals were in the security forces and elsewhere in the government, and the human rights organizations stated this was a long-standing problem and one that fostered a climate of impunity.

During a government and UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) military operation to question and arrest local Muslim militia leader Yossouf Malinga, security forces killed Malinga in a February 7 shootout in Bangui's predominantly Muslim PK5 neighborhood. According to the Christian Broadcasting Network, his death was followed by several violent incidents, including the fatal stabbing of a Protestant minister at his church by supporters of Malinga's militia group, the burning of two other churches, and the killing of a Muslim civilian, reportedly by anti-Balaka elements in retaliation. In addition, 300 residents of the Fondo neighborhood, also in the same district, fled their homes and took shelter at the recently closed IDP site at nearby M'Poko International Airport.

Muslims continued to report harassment outside of the PK5 enclave and exclusion from national decision making. Muslim leaders cited situations where Muslims were treated as outsiders or as a different class of citizens, especially when requesting government services.

Some government officials stated they intended to focus efforts on reconciliation among religious groups, although observers stated they made limited progress for a second year. The national Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Reconciliation Commission was created in December 2016, but its members had not been named by the end of 2017. Following the announcement of its creation in 2016, local peace committees began meeting in several areas. On August 23, President Faustin-Archange Touadera appointed new administrators for all of the country's 16 prefectures; none of the appointees were Muslim. Critics stated the appointments lacked religious diversity. On September 12, Touadera named a new cabinet that included seven Muslims among the 34 ministers. The previous cabinet included four Muslims among 23 ministers. The percentage of Muslims in the cabinet increased from 17 to 21.

In February the government completed the closure of the IDP camp located at M'Poko International Airport. More than 28,000 residents, predominantly Christian, were unsure of where to go after the camp's closure, according to UNICEF. Many of the IDPs previously lived in the PK5 neighborhood.

In July the Ministry of Social Affairs provided Muslim IDPs living on the grounds of Bangui's Central Mosque with 50,000 CFA francs (\$88) each to assist them with finding housing, mostly in the PK5 neighborhood.

The government continued to observe Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as official but unpaid holidays. Unlike in the previous year, the government did not host an iftar.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Armed groups, which generally operated freely in certain areas of the country, continued to commit many of the actions affecting religious freedom. The government remained incapable of imposing its authority throughout the territory, preventing abuses, or ensuring the rule of law and the administration of justice, according to many observers.

Armed groups, particularly the anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka, continued to control significant swaths of territory throughout the country and acted as de facto governing institutions, according to media and UN reports.

Police and the gendarmerie failed to stop or punish abuses committed by the ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka militias, including killings, abductions, physical mistreatment, extortion, and gender-based violence.

MINUSCA was deployed to multiple areas within the country in response to violence between anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka elements during the year.

According to UN Independent Expert Marie-Therese Keita Bocoum, in mid-February anti-Balaka fighters reportedly killed at least 16 civilians from the predominantly Muslim and nomadic Peulh community near Ippy, Ouaka Prefecture, during an ambush on a truck carrying persons trying to reach safety in Bambari. Between March 7 and 15, attacks carried out by anti-Balaka elements on the village of Site Chinois, to the south of Bria, reportedly resulted in the deaths of an estimated nine Peulh civilians and massive population displacement.

On May 11, the local branch of the Red Cross in Alindao, Basse-Kotto, reported that 37 bodies had been recovered and 110 persons injured in the locality following attacks carried out against the population between May 8 and May 10, reportedly by predominantly Muslim Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique – Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC) militias. According to MINUSCA, a group of assailants believed to be associated with anti-Balaka forces attacked a UN convoy near the town of Bangassou in the southeast on May 8, killing five peacekeepers. This was part of a series of attacks that included attacks on the Muslim population in Bangassou.

According to the July report from the UN Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic, on May 13, anti-Balaka fighters attacked the Tokoyo neighborhood of Bangassou and the MINUSCA base, resulting in 72 persons killed, 76 injured, and 4,400 displaced. During the attacks 1,000 persons took refuge in a mosque in Bangassou, and 500 took refuge in a hospital. According to the UN Panel, attackers specifically targeted members of the Muslim community sheltering inside a Catholic church after peacekeepers left the church and returned to the MINUSCA base to protect it, leaving the Muslims at the church unprotected. One UN peacekeeper was killed. On May 14, UN forces were able to regain control of the area and those who sought refuge were freed. The Red Cross reported that it found the bodies of 115 individuals, the majority of whom were likely Muslim, in Bangassou on May 17, following the several days long anti-Balaka attacks. Approximately 2,000 Muslims remained in the Catholic mission after the attacks. Their Muslim neighborhood was destroyed by the anti-Balaka, and many homes were burned down. Additional anti-Balaka attacks targeting Muslims took place in June, leading to the displacement of additional civilians, approximately 21,000 altogether.

According to MINUSCA, on July 21, anti-Balaka militias targeted a Roman Catholic seminary in Bangassou which was providing refuge to an estimated 2,000 internally displaced Muslims. During the attack, two children were seriously hurt. A Muslim woman was also kidnapped, presumably by anti-Balaka militia; in response Muslim groups detained six Christians. Two of the Christians were reportedly released on July 22, and the whereabouts of the others remained unknown at year's end.

According to international media reports, in mid-May the predominantly Muslim armed group Popular Front for the Renaissance of Central African Republic (FPRC) entered the town of Bria and faced off with anti-Balaka militants, displacing tens of thousands of persons, mostly Christians. A month after the

FPRC forces entered, approximately 41,000 persons, mostly Christians, continued to live in IDP camps. The PK3 camp, close to the UN base in Bria, had more than 26,000 inhabitants.

On August 8, 50 Christians were killed by the ex-Seleka in Gambo after anti-Balaka forces were cleared from the area by the MINUSCA.

According to the July UN Report of the Independent Expert, the Human Rights Division of MINUSCA documented 45 cases of violence committed against persons accused of witchcraft, involving 77 victims – 38 men, 32 women, and seven children. According to the report, most individuals accused of witchcraft and charlatanism were women and children, and a large number went to prison. The report said false allegations were made by members of armed groups to terrorize and extort money from the population. The report recommended the prosecution and punishment of all perpetrators of violence against persons accused of witchcraft.

In October a Bangui newspaper reported that a “network of sorcerers” had been dismantled in the village of Ndangala, outside Bangui. Villagers reportedly handed over to authorities in the town of Bimbo for investigation 12 individuals whom they accused of attempting to kill a woman through witchcraft.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

While most observers stated violent conflict and instability in the country had multiple sources, they also said religion continued to be used as a tool to divide the population. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to international news reports, on November 11, attackers launched a grenade attack on a nightclub concert intended to foster reconciliation and social cohesion and attended by both Muslims and Christians, killing four and injuring more than 20 persons. Christian and Muslim victims were taken to separate hospitals to diffuse tensions. On November 12, reportedly in retaliation three motorcycle taxi drivers were killed and their bodies delivered to a local mosque.

According to the July 7 report of the Panel of Experts, rhetoric against the Peulh community was widespread in the country, and the situation was reminiscent of 2014, when the negative discourse against one specific Muslim community – the Chadians – led to the targeting of the Muslim community as a whole.

Negative comments about or directed toward Muslims, particularly members of the Peulh community, were still common in most media outlets. Private media outlets reportedly continued to be heavily influenced by their financiers, generally representing a Christian perspective, and led by Christian editors. There had been no Muslim-operated radio station or Muslim-oriented program on the national radio station since September 2015.

Muslims continued to report facing consistent social discrimination and marginalization, including an inability to move freely or to access schools, hospitals, and basic necessities, such as services provided by the government, as well as those provided by private donors and organizations.

Muslims reported facing several challenges within their community, including differences among Muslims of Arab, Peulh, and Bantu ethnicity regarding identity, discrimination, and internal division over leadership.

According to international reports, Christians felt that MINUSCA was biased towards the Muslim population because many peacekeepers were Muslim.

In January prayers resumed at the site of the Petevo Mosque in Bangui. The mosque was destroyed during the intercommunal violence in 2014. In May prayers resumed at the Al Faroukou de Yapele Mosque in Bangui. The mosque was heavily damaged during the intercommunal violence in 2014.

In June the Religious Platform held an interreligious service for peace at the National Assembly, attended by the country's president and members of the government and parliament. Religious Platform leaders called for an end to violence, a return to peace, and reconciliation. They emphasized their belief that the crisis the country was experiencing was not an interconfessional crisis, but began because of economic and social conditions and had become associated with religion due to manipulation by bad actors.

On September 30, several imams, including the Muslim representative of the Religious Platform, held a reconciliation prayer service and ceremony near the site of the representative's destroyed mosque and home in the predominantly Christian Eighth District. The mosque was destroyed in 2014. During the ceremony a local anti-Balaka leader called for peace and reconciliation and invited Muslims to return to the community.

Prayers resumed at the site of the Miskine Mosque in Bangui's predominantly Christian Fifth District in September. The mosque was one of the first mosques destroyed during the intercommunal violence in 2014.

On February 10, Muslim and Christian communities from districts affected by intercommunal violence celebrated the one-year anniversary of a nonaggression pact signed between groups that were engaged in armed conflict. The celebration was held at an intersection that, prior to the pact, served as a barrier between communities and obstructed the movement of both Christians and Muslims to certain parts of the city.

The Religious Platform continued to spread messages of peace and reconciliation throughout the country. For example, in November, following a grenade attack on a nightclub in Bangui, the Platform issued a statement saying, "Christians and Muslims must remain united and speak one language in order to bring peace to the Central African Republic. During this time of disturbance, all peace-loving Central Africans must be vigilant and act for the cause of peace."

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador raised issues related to religion, including violence against Muslims and Christians, freedom of movement, the return of refugees and IDPs, representation in government, and access to the justice system and other government services. He encouraged governmental outreach to all religious communities in high-level meetings, including with President Touadera, the presidential advisor for national reconciliation, and the minister of social affairs and reconciliation.

The Ambassador and embassy officials engaged regularly with religious leaders, including the leaders of the Religious Platform, the Imam of the Central Mosque, and the Coordinating Committee for Central African Muslim Organizations, on issues related to religious freedom and reconciliation, and they discussed ways to broaden access and dialogue to elected officials.

The U.S. government continued to fund a consortium formed to build up the capacity of the Religious Platform to bolster its high-profile role in promoting social cohesion, including reconciliation between religious communities.

In February the Ambassador, the Senior USAID Advisor for the Great Lakes Region, and the USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance Coordinator

visited a Muslim and a Christian IDP site and the Muslim enclave in Boda in the southwestern part of the country. In all three locations, they discussed with local residents concerns such as religious tolerance, freedom of movement, and assistance for returnees.

In March U.S. government officials visited the Central Mosque and met with the imam and several displaced persons. They discussed topics including equal representation and access to government services for Muslims, obstacles to the return of refugees and IDPs, and freedom of movement.

In May the Ambassador returned to Boda, where he met with religious leaders from the Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant communities to discuss progress on intercommunal reconciliation and challenges faced by their respective communities.

Also in May a local NGO launched an embassy-funded program that brought together Muslim and Christian women from three Bangui districts for training on promoting intercommunal reconciliation and social cohesion among their communities, along with technical and financial support for starting small businesses.

In August the Ambassador inaugurated an embassy-funded program to provide free motorcycle taxi rides between the primarily Muslim PK5 neighborhood and other communities in Bangui. The objective was to reduce the isolation of Muslim residents and to encourage non-Muslims to travel to PK5, the site of Bangui's largest public market.

In October the Charge d'Affaires delivered remarks at the finale of an embassy-sponsored basketball tournament that included mixed faith teams from all eight Bangui districts. The tournament promoted reconciliation among residents of the districts, which had experienced significant intercommunal violence since 2013. The imam from the Religious Platform attended the game and afterwards met with community members from a predominantly Christian district of Bangui, where the tournament was held.

On August 31, embassy officers visited the Central Mosque and discussed with the deputy imam the social and security conditions for Muslims in Bangui and U.S. engagement on religious freedom and reconciliation.