

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2018 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. The government continued to grant Christians and Muslims access to public facilities for special religious events.

The Catholic and Protestant communities conducted public outreach and evangelization campaigns in stadiums and other public spaces during the year. In support of the atmosphere of religious harmony, the Islamic Council encouraged the country’s Muslims to lead ethically sound lives and to be respectful of other religious communities in the country. According to Muslim, Catholic, and other Christian leaders, there were no reports of religiously motivated incidents or actions directed against their respective communities. Sources stated there were varying views on the practice and acceptance of religious syncretism.

The U.S. embassy continued to promote religious freedom and tolerance in engagements with leaders in government, the diplomatic community, and civil society groups. The Ambassador celebrated National Religious Freedom Day by hosting an interfaith dinner with six prominent religious leaders where the Ambassador and guests discussed religious freedom, the state of interfaith cooperation, and religious syncretism. The U.S. embassy supported multiple events with religious leaders and youth groups to discuss community engagement and countering violent extremism related to religion. 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 5.1 million (July 2018 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 whom approximately 33 percent belong to evangelical Christian 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. An estimated 2 percent of the population is atheist. In significant portions of the population, traditional beliefs influence religious practices, including ancestor worship and a widespread belief in witchcraft or "*Ndoki*."

Many residents not included in government statistics are foreign workers with families that come from predominantly Muslim countries, primarily in West Africa. The country hosts more than 26,000 refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR), although the refugees began returning to the CAR voluntarily during the year with assistance from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). According to UNHCR, more than 15 percent of the refugees from the CAR are Muslim.

There are varying estimates for the size of the Muslim community, which is predominantly Sunni. The High Islamic Council of Congo (CSIC) states Muslims are nearly 12 percent of the population. The government stated it planned to conduct an official census during the year, to include statistics on religious identity, but funding was not available.

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 including religiously affiliated political parties.

A decree 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.

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.

The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools. Private schools may provide religious instruction. The law requires that all public and private schools respect all philosophical and religious doctrines. 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

As in previous years, the government granted Christians and Muslims access to public facilities for special religious events. For example, on September 12, the country's Muslim community celebrated Eid al-Adha in Saint-Denis at a stadium located on the grounds of the presidential residence.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

NGOs and religious leaders stated that the general population, including Muslims, continued its broad support of the 2015 ban on full-face Islamic veils, viewing the ban as a preemptive counterterrorism measure.

During the year, leaders and representatives from the Muslim community reported tensions between adherents of Sunni and Shia Islam. According to a religious leader, the tensions were a result of philosophical differences within the Muslim community and did not result in violence.

According to various sources, there were differing views on the practice and acceptance of religious syncretism.

All religious communities conducting humanitarian, social support, or community development activities informed local authorities of their travel within the country. According to the CSIC, the organization notified the government when it knew of Muslims traveling out of country to participate in religious education or for activities sponsored by the CSIC. Representatives of Christian communities did not report their international travel to domestic authorities.

The Ecumenical Council, representing the Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist Churches, met at least biweekly and conducted joint community outreach on topics

including peace and religious tolerance. The Revivalist Council, representing evangelical Protestant churches, met at least twice during the year.

During the year, the Islamic Council remained active and hosted discussions on humanitarian efforts, social action, and assistance to vulnerable persons. In January the Islamic Council conducted an awareness campaign with participation by the Ministry of Women's Promotion on gender-based violence. As part of the campaign, the CSIC issued a public statement against gender-based violence in the country that encouraged Muslims to lead ethically sound lives, respect the laws of the country, and respect the teachings of their religious doctrine.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. embassy raised the issue of countering religious extremism, in addition to promoting the value of religious tolerance, in its engagement with the government, the diplomatic community, religious leaders, and representatives of civil society. The embassy used public diplomacy tools, including social media platforms, to highlight religious engagement, to counter religious extremism, and to promote religious tolerance.

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues including interfaith relations and countering religious extremism with leaders and representatives of religious groups, including the relationship between various religious communities and their individual relationships with government organizations.

On January 18, embassy officials facilitated a discussion with more than 80 youth leaders on religious freedom in the United States that provided participants the opportunity to discuss religious and interfaith practices in Congo, promote religious freedom, and advance a counter-extremism narrative.

In celebration of National Religious Freedom Day on March 15, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith dinner for six of the country's most prominent religious leaders. Guests discussed the state of interfaith cooperation, religious syncretism, and the question of whether the government interfered in their work. The Ambassador emphasized our shared commitment to religious freedom.

In October the Ambassador met with the Catholic Bishop of Kinkala to identify ways to advance peace initiatives in a post-conflict situation. Meeting participants discussed the need for interreligious dialogue to strengthen the current peace efforts in the country. The embassy continued its engagement with religious

communities involved in interfaith dialogue and conflict reduction throughout the country.