

# REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2019 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. In May the government conducted a campaign to enforce compliance by religious groups with previously established building, finance, and noise codes. Media reported the government closed 18 churches found not to be in compliance. The government continued to grant Christians and Muslims access to public facilities for special religious events.

According to Muslim and Christian leaders, there were no reports of religiously motivated incidents or actions directed against their respective communities.

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 engaged with religious leaders across the country to exchange views on peace, security, religious freedom, the state of interfaith cooperation, and religious syncretism. The embassy supported multiple events with religious leaders and youth groups to discuss community engagement and the government’s efforts to end a conflict in the Pool region during the year. 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 5.2 million (midyear 2019 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-born workers with families that come from predominantly Muslim countries, primarily in West Africa. There are varying estimates for the size of the Muslim community, which is predominantly Sunni. The High Islamic Council of Congo estimates the Muslim proportion of the population to be approximately 12 percent, a figure that includes non-Congolese. The country hosts more than 19,800 refugees from the Central African Republic, approximately 15 percent of whom are Muslim, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

## **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 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**

In May the government launched an operation to ensure compliance with a 1960 law and 2017 government circular note governing the operation of cultural, religious, and other nongovernmental groups. The launch of the operation followed a briefing by Police Colonel Jean Batantout to members of COSERCO, an umbrella organization of revivalist churches, during which Batantout stated the government also intended to implement a requirement for pastors to hold a degree in theology. As of year's end, the government had not implemented the requirement.

Media reported in May that the government closed 18 churches that were not in compliance with building, safety, and noise regulations. A spokesman for the churches acknowledged the need for inspections "in order to improve our behavior."

As in previous years, the government granted Christians and Muslims access to public facilities for special religious events. For example, on August 22-25, members of the country's evangelical Christian community held a National Evangelical Convention at Brazzaville's Masmaba Debat public stadium.

On a visit (his third to the country) to inaugurate a new Orthodox church in Pointe Noire, Theodore II, Primate of the Church and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa, met with President Denis Sassou-N'guesso on February 15. A newspaper article expressed the hope that the patriarch's visit might accelerate the slow pace of cooperation between the Church and the government – cooperation that to date, noted a press item, amounted only to an orphanage and a school.

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

According to Muslim and Christian leaders, there were no reports of religiously motivated incidents or actions directed against their respective communities.

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

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues with government organizations and officials. Topics discussed included interfaith relations and trafficking in persons with leaders and representatives of religious groups and government officials. In discussions with government officials regarding trafficking in persons, the embassy regularly refuted assertions that the practice is associated with non-Christian values.

Embassy representatives encouraged efforts to increase dialogue and communication at the local, regional, and national levels. In March embassy representatives worked with the United Nations to encourage community-level dialogues in Pool Department after a period of violence that ended in late 2017. These dialogues included members of religious communities, community leaders, and local officials. Throughout the year, in Kinkala, the capital of the department, the Ambassador discussed the government's efforts to bring peace and security to the region with the Bishop of Kinkala and representatives from local religious communities. On the national level, embassy representatives supported efforts by Christian and Muslim leaders to help life return to normal, foster community-level dialogues and allow life to return to normal.

The embassy used social media platforms to highlight religious engagement and to promote religious tolerance, peace, and dialogue during the year.