

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

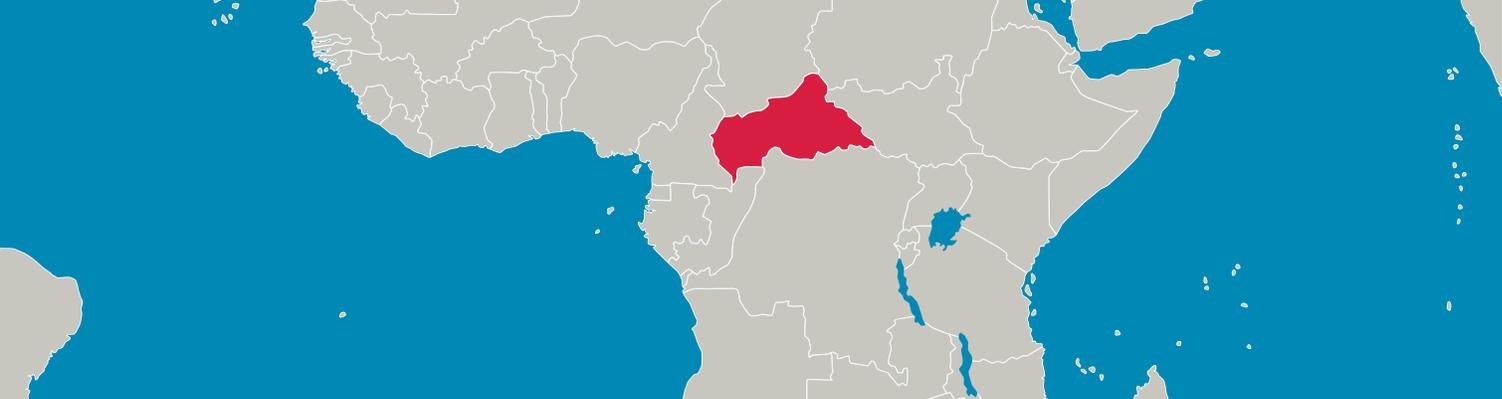
Religious freedom conditions in the Central African Republic (CAR) trended negatively in 2018. Armed actors continued to control an estimated 80 percent of the country, vying for resources and territory, and attacking civilians and communities based on their religious and ethnic identities, including mass attacks against places of worship. Infrastructure generally, and roads in particular are extremely poor, inhibiting the movement of security and aid actors to many towns across CAR. Government representatives also feared for their safety, lack funding, and are unable to reach many communities. In May 2018, at least 15 people were killed in an attack on the Notre Dame de Fatima church in Bangui, and in November, at least 112 civilians—including two priests—were killed when an armed group attacked a displaced persons camp near the Catholic Cathedral in Alindao. Also, in 2018, the government took no apparent action to rebuild or restore the hundreds

of mosques destroyed in the 2014 sectarian violence. Marginalization of Muslims continued, as well as limitations to Muslims' free movement and unequal representation in government. Justice and reconciliation efforts also remain stalled, and an ongoing culture of impunity for human rights and religious freedom violations threatens efforts toward long-term stability and reconciliation. The CAR government has failed to acknowledge religious freedom issues and has lacked the will to address them in areas within its capacity to reach and work.

Given the systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of freedom of religion, USCIRF again recommends in 2019 that CAR be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has done every year since 2015. The U.S. Department of State has not designated CAR as a CPC.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Increase engagement with CAR authorities, the United Nations (UN), and international donors to ensure that issues related to ending sectarian violence and impunity, increasing interfaith reconciliation, and affirming the rights of religious freedom and religious minorities are supported and raised in all engagements with relevant parties;
- Increase efforts to achieve accountability for human rights violations, including through:
 - Assisting the UN Security Council in sanctioning armed actors responsible for organizing and/or engaging in sectarian violence, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity; and
 - Funding programs to reestablish and professionalize CAR's judiciary and to support the Special Criminal Court (SCC);
 - Press CAR authorities to undertake initiatives to ensure that Muslims have a future in the country by:
 - Rebuilding destroyed Muslim mosques and properties;
 - Ensuring Muslim participation in government administration, security forces, and police units;
- Safeguarding sustainable returns of Muslim refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes; and
- Expanding reconciliation programs and interfaith dialogue to rural areas; and
- Increase funding for peace and security initiatives; bolster humanitarian assistance for refugees, IDPs, and returnees, and rebuilding projects; and collaborate with humanitarian actors to collect data on religious demographics to more effectively protect religious freedom and minorities.



COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Central African Republic

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

POPULATION

5,745,062

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

N/A

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

35% Indigenous Beliefs

25% Protestant

25% Roman Catholic

15% Muslim

(Animist beliefs are also integrated into Christian and Muslim practices.)

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook

BACKGROUND

The Central African Republic (CAR) ranks at the bottom of the United Nations (UN) Human Development Index (188 out of 189), and extremely poor infrastructure inhibits development in education, security, and the economy. CAR also ranks last on the Global Hunger Index (119 out of 119), and a majority of the population live below the international poverty line. CAR has struggled with a series of coups and governance and security challenges since independence in 1960, with one of the biggest crises beginning in late 2012 and leading to an escalation in violations of human rights, including religious freedom. Around 50 percent of the population are Christian—nearly evenly split between Protestants and Roman Catholics, and 15 percent are Muslim. However, religious identities in CAR are syncretic in many ways, with people throughout the country integrating other indigenous beliefs into the ways they practice their faith and live their lives. Although people identify most closely with their ethnic and tribal groups, religious identity is important to many Central Africans, and religious leaders wield significant influence in society.

For decades, ethnic and religious resentments have been exacerbated by and closely interlinked with economic and political grievances. These issues were heightened in 2013 when the mostly Muslim Séléka militias overthrew then President Francois Bozize, a

Christian. Following the atrocities committed against the mainly non-Muslim populations during the coup, including by Chadian and Sudanese mercenary fighters, mostly Christian anti-balaka (anti-machete) groups formed and conducted reprisal attacks on civilians perceived to be Muslim or of an ethnic group aligned with the Séléka. Since then, the armed groups known as “ex-Séléka,” “anti-balaka,” or “self-defense groups” have evolved and conducted attacks against communities and places of worship based on their religious identity. The sectarian conflict heightened already hostile interreligious relations and rhetoric, displaced more than one million people, killed thousands, and led to the destruction of 417 out of 436 mosques in the country. In December 2014, the [UN Commission of Inquiry on the Central African Republic \(COI\) issued a report](#) that found a “pattern of ethnic cleansing committed by the anti-balaka in the areas in which Muslims had been living,” and UN officials warned of the risk of genocide. In some cases, Muslims were forced to convert to Christianity or hide their religious identity to be safe from anti-balaka attacks. In response to the crisis, in 2014 the UN deployed the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic, or [MINUSCA](#), which had more than 14,000 personnel posted in the country at the end of the reporting period. In 2015, under transitional president

Catherine Samba-Panza, the Special Criminal Court (SCC) was also established in order to address grievous human rights abuses committed since 2003. The Bangui Forum on National Reconciliation paved the way toward the 2016 election of current president Faustin-Archange Touadéra. In 2016, CAR adopted a new constitution, which enshrines freedom of religion and belief and prohibits religious fundamentalism and intolerance. Nevertheless, respect for the rule of law and judicial accountability remain core challenges.

A total of 2.5 million people are estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance. According to the UN, there were [640,969](#) IDPs in CAR at the end of 2018, as well as hundreds of thousands of refugees in neighboring Cameroon, the

Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Chad.

Updated religious demographic data are sensitive and remain largely unavailable, including statistics on the numbers of Muslims who have returned to CAR, or figures of displaced Muslims and Christians in the IDP camps.

In addition to the UN, several external actors have intervened in CAR, including the African Union, France, and Russia, in furtherance of various peace and security goals. After the reporting period, on February 6, 2019, armed group leaders signed a new peace deal in Sudan, which mentioned a commitment to religious freedom and human rights.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

Religious Sectarian Violence and Ethnic Cleansing

In 2018, leaders of armed groups, as well as some government officials, continued to manipulate ethnic and religious identity issues and deliberately foment further conflict along religious lines to serve their political and economic interests. At the same time, the conflict continued to be very complex, and religion remained just one of several drivers. Due to the competition for control over the rich mineral resources and territory, it was not always clear whether attacks were intended to target

certain communities and locations based on ethnic and religious identity or for other reasons. International and domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) also warned about the impact of hate speech and incitement to violence in CAR dividing communities along religious lines. For the first time, in January 2018, the UN Security Council also added the potential for sanctions designations of individuals and entities that commit “acts of incitement to violence, in particular on an ethnic or religious basis” in its extension of the [existing sanctions](#) regime on CAR.

While armed actors coalesced in 2013 and 2014 along religious lines, many allegiances have since shifted: some groups have merged across religious lines, and fighting

between factions with the same religious identity has also occurred. Nevertheless, during the past year there was another escalation in attacks on civilians targeted based on religious identity. Armed actors frequently attacked civilians and IDP camps in reprisals or based on

the belief that a camp was harboring enemy fighters. In March, Catholic priest Father Joseph Desire Angbabata was killed, reportedly while trying to protect refugees at his church compound in Bambari. In May, in the capital Bangui, at least 15 people—including a priest—were killed in an attack on the Notre Dame de Fatima church and associated fighting after the attack. Civilians reportedly carried the body of the priest toward the presidential palace afterward in demonstration. In July, the vicar general of Bambari was killed, reportedly by members of the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC), the predominantly Muslim ex-Séléka militia.

On November 15, UPC fighters and Muslim civilians attacked, burned, and ransacked an IDP camp located at the Catholic mission in Alindao. Alindao has faced recurring sectarian conflict over the past seven years, and Christians and Muslims remained separated throughout 2018. MINUSCA forces failed to protect the camp and reportedly allowed anti-balaka fighters to operate there, putting the IDPs at greater risk. Human rights and humanitarian actors initially

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reported between 70 and 100 people—including two priests—were killed in the massacre, and more than 18,000 people were impacted by the destruction of the camp. [MINUSCA investigated](#) the incident and reported at least 112 civilians were killed. In December, an IDP camp at the Catholic church in Ippy was also attacked. During the year, sectarian violence also occurred in Bambari, Batangafo, and Bria, among other locations, causing additional deaths, destruction of property, and displacement of thousands of civilians.

Harmful Practices and Sectarian Conflict

In recent years, children in CAR have also been targeted because of their perceived religion or community affiliation; in 2018, they continued to experience brutal violence and forced recruitment and enslavement by armed groups.

In 2018, abuses of individuals accused of practicing witchcraft continued to be a serious concern. Individuals who are accused of practicing witchcraft or sorcery may be buried alive or otherwise killed by fellow citizens, or arrested by authorities and formally prosecuted. At the Bimbo prison for women outside of Bangui, at least 20 women were reportedly detained in 2018 for practices of charlatanism and sorcery. Anti-balaka fighters have also targeted civilians suspected of practicing witchcraft. Women, children, the pygmy population, and the elderly are most commonly the victims of abusive witchcraft accusations in CAR.

Discrimination against Muslims

In 2018, Muslims continued to face marginalization, discrimination, and limitations to free movement around the country. Since the displacement and killing of most of the minority Muslim population from CAR over the past four years, it is unknown how many Muslims remain in the country. Muslims historically faced societal and structural discrimination, receiving low representation in government and diminished access to health care, education, and identity documents.

Muslim populations often reside in separate enclaves, such as in Bangui where most Muslims live in the PK5 neighborhood. In Bangassou, where Muslims remained trapped in the Catholic church compound since a 2017 attack by anti-balaka fighters, religious leaders have played a key role in protecting civilians. In April 2018, two of the most influential religious leaders in CAR—Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, the archbishop of Bangui, and Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, president of the Islamic Community of the Central African Republic (an NGO)—mediated an agreement between armed actors to ensure civilians' ability to move safely outside of the compound.

During USCIRF's [visit](#) to CAR in 2017, senior officials were dismissive of Muslims' safety concerns and acknowledged neither the religious dynamics of the conflict nor that it has resulted in gross violations of religious freedom. Reports from NGOs suggest that in 2018, the government took few steps to address these concerns.

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Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation

In 2018, some progress was made toward ending impunity and building justice and peace in CAR. The African Union has taken the lead on peace

processes, but parallel efforts have arisen in light of failures of past agreements. Armed actors continued to meet and negotiate in 2018. The latest iteration resulted in a [peace agreement signed](#) in February 2019—after the reporting period—in Khartoum, Sudan, giving rise to new optimism. The agreement identified the destructive role that political manipulation of ethnic and religious identities has had on the country, and signatories reiterated their commitment to respecting fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom and related human rights. However, the agreement quickly faced setbacks. Religious leaders also continued to engage in other fora for the promotion of peace between religious groups and the cessation of violence. They wield political influence and significant authority among the population, and have had success in some local peacebuilding efforts.

The SCC, the hybrid court established in 2015, was not fully staffed until 2017, and investigations into human rights abuses did not begin until October 2018. Prior to the start of SCC operations, anti-balaka leader Rodrigue Ngaibona was convicted in January 2018 in the Bangui Criminal Court—the first such conviction since the start of the current war. In 2018, MINUSCA also arrested militia members accused of human rights violations.

In November 2018, anti-balaka commander Alfred Yékatom, known as “Rambo,” was arrested in CAR and transferred to the International Criminal Court (ICC). [His arrest warrant](#) and charges relate to systematic and widespread attacks on civilians and property based on religious identity, and reference Yékatom’s use of “violent and inflammatory rhetoric,” orders of subordinates to “kill Sélékas and Muslims” and “destroy the Muslims houses so they will go back to their country,” and other orders to attack mosques and torture and kill. This was only the second arrest of an anti-balaka leader by the ICC. Human rights groups continued to call for greater justice and accountability.

U.S. POLICY

The United States maintains diplomatic relations with CAR, but for the majority of the reporting period the ambassador post was vacant; Lucy Tamlyn was

nominated in July 2018 as the U.S. ambassador to the Central African Republic and confirmed in January 2019, after the reporting period. The United States continued to provide assistance for peacekeeping operations and security sector reform, and is the largest donor of humanitarian funding for CAR. The United States supported the renewal of MINUSCA’s mandate in December. In 2018, the United States also provided support to peacebuilding and natural resource management projects, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID) funding for the [Central African Interfaith Peacebuilding Partnership](#) and other initiatives that specifically address religious divisions and

hate. The United States continued its support for the African Union-led peace initiative.

In May 2018, the White House released a [press statement](#) on religious violence against civilians and urged

officials and security forces to provide security for all citizens regardless of faith. On May 10, 2018, President Donald J. Trump [declared](#) that the national emergency related to security issues in CAR, as begun by [Executive Order \(EO\) 13667 in 2014](#), would continue for an additional year. EO 13667 imposes sanctions on individuals contributing to the conflict in CAR, including any persons responsible for attacks on religious sites, or locations where civilians are seeking refuge.

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