

# DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religious belief. Catholics reported violence and harassment toward clergy members in response to their political activism. Armed men dressed in Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) uniforms killed a Catholic priest who ran an activist website documenting ethnic abuse. Two Catholic priests were arrested in connection with a political protest and released several days later. One Protestant minister was arrested after running a civil society workshop on elections and held incommunicado and without charge by the National Intelligence Services (ANR) for a month before being released. There were reports of security forces harassing Muslims for money or property in connection with the government's pursuit of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a largely Muslim rebel group. Religious organizations became more politically active in advance of upcoming elections, and some parishes and convents reported experiencing threats and intimidation from government security services. Because religious and political issues overlap, it was difficult to categorize some incidents as being based solely on religious identity. Although the government has suspended granting registration permits since 2014, many religious groups operated without government authorization or interference.

During the year, members of the Lega ethnic group attacked Jehovah's Witnesses in several provinces for reportedly refusing to participate in traditional Kimbilikiti healing practices and initiation rituals. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the group killed a 60-year-old Jehovah's Witness woman in October; raped two Jehovah's Witness women, beat several Jehovah's Witnesses, destroyed a Jehovah's Witness worship hall, and robbed and destroyed the homes of three Jehovah's Witness families in November; and assaulted a Jehovah's Witness man and kidnapped his son in July. On August 3, a court convicted and sentenced to life in prison Jedidia Mwanga for the 2015 killing of Jehovah's Witness Kingeleji Mukoso for allegedly refusing to consult a traditional healer. In South Kivu Province in October, the family of a Christian woman killed by a Muslim man in September along with other members of the local Christian community reportedly burned down two mosques.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials met regularly with the government to discuss religious freedom issues, such as government relations with religious

organizations. The embassy had similar discussions with religious leaders and human rights organizations and engaged with members of different religious organizations to promote interfaith peacebuilding efforts.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 81.3 million (July 2016 estimate). The last national census was performed in 1981, and many existing demographic statistics vary in estimates and reliability. The Pew Research Center estimates 95.8 percent of the population is Christian, 1.5 percent is Muslim, and 1.8 percent report no religious affiliation (2010 estimate). Of the Christian groups, 48.1 percent are Protestant, including evangelical Christians and the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu (Kimbanguist), and 47.3 percent are Catholic. Other Christian groups include the Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and the Greek Orthodox Church. There are small communities of Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Bahais, and followers of indigenous religious beliefs. Muslim leaders estimate their community to be approximately 5 percent of the population, rather than the 1.5 percent reported by Pew.

A significant portion of the population combines traditional beliefs and practices with Christianity or other religious beliefs.

Most religious groups are found throughout the country and are widely represented in cities and large towns. Muslims mainly reside in the provinces of Maniema, North Kivu, and Kinshasa, and in the former provinces of Orientale, Kasai Occidental, and Bandundu.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and the right to worship subject to "compliance with the law, public order, public morality, and the rights of others." It stipulates the right to religious freedom cannot be abrogated even when the government declares a state of emergency or siege.

The law regulates the establishment and operation of religious groups. According to the law, the government may legally recognize, suspend recognition of, or

dissolve religious groups. The government grants tax-exempt status to recognized religious groups. Nonprofit organizations, including religious groups, foreign and domestic, must register with the government to obtain official recognition by submitting a copy of their bylaws and constitution. Religious groups must register only once for the group as a whole, but nonprofit organizations affiliated with a religious group must register separately. Upon submission, the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights (MOJ) issues a provisional approval and, within six months, a permanent approval or rejection. Unless the ministry specifically rejects the application, the group is considered approved and registered after six months even if the ministry has not issued a final determination. Applications coming from international headquarters of religious organizations must be approved by the presidency after submission through the MOJ. The law requires officially recognized religious groups to operate as nonprofits and respect the general public order. It also permits religious groups to establish places of worship and train clergy. The law prescribes penalties of up to two years' imprisonment and/or 200,000 Congolese francs (CDF) (\$165) for groups which are not properly registered but receive gifts and donations on behalf of a church or religious organization.

The constitution allows public schools to work with religious authorities to provide religious education to students in accordance with students' religious beliefs, provided the parents request it.

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

### **Government Practices**

Because religious and political issues overlap, it was difficult to categorize some incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

In March a dozen armed men wearing FARDC uniforms killed Rev. Vincent Machozi, a Catholic priest, at a gathering of tribal and religious leaders in North Kivu. Machozi was a member of the Augustinians of the Assumption religious order and operated a website documenting atrocities committed against ethnic Nande (Yira) people. In October armed assailants shot and killed another Catholic priest, Rev. Joseph Milimbi Nguli, in Lubumbashi. Milimbi had previously preached in favor of respect for presidential term limits and respect for the constitution. Authorities arrested three FARDC soldiers in connection with the killing, but there was no information on their status at year's end.

Authorities arrested several local imams in Beni territory along with dozens of ADF members following an August 13-14 ADF attack in Luhanga that killed approximately 50 people. Several imams were charged with involvement with the armed militia group. Separately, the government arrested and sentenced one imam to death, which was commuted to life in prison, in an expedited trial for recruiting youth to join “terrorist” groups.

Some religious organizations criticized the government’s failure to hold constitutionally mandated elections during the year and there were reports of retaliatory political intimidation. Two Catholic priests were arrested during antigovernment protests on September 19-20, but were released several days later. The ANR arrested Protestant minister Remy Flame Manguamba on September 15 during a civil society workshop hosted by his church, and held him incommunicado and without charge until he was released on October 17.

Some representatives of the Catholic Church, which publicly urged the government to abide by constitutionally mandated electoral deadlines, stated they were subjected to verbal harassment and government interference based on their political advocacy.

In conjunction with government military operations in North Kivu against the ADF, there were reports that in the Beni and Goma areas the national police and army harassed members of the Muslim community, particularly those dressed in a way that identified them as Muslim. According to reports, this usually involved demanding money or property such as cell phones. Leaders of the Muslim community reported they kept in frequent contact with the government to share information regarding the ADF.

The MOJ has not issued final registration permits for religious groups since 2014, reportedly due to an internal investigation into registration practices resulting in fraud. In the interim, however, groups have been presumed approved and have been permitted to organize, and unregistered domestic religious groups reported they operated unhindered. The MOJ estimated over 2,000 registration applications for both religious and nonreligious NGOs remained pending. Foreign religious groups reported they operated without restriction after receiving registration approval from the government.

Leaders of all major denominations reported their members practiced their faith without interference from the government or local authorities and fully participated in their communities without religious discrimination. Aside from tension over

electoral issues, Catholic, Muslim, Protestant, and Kimbanguist religious leaders stated they had a good relationship with the government, and the government continued to rely on religious organizations to provide public services such as education and healthcare throughout the country. According to the Ministry of Education, approximately 72 percent of primary school students and 65 percent of secondary school students attended government-funded schools administered by religious organizations.

Muslim community leaders said the government did not afford them some of the same privileges as larger religious groups. The government continued to deny Muslims the opportunity to organize chaplains to provide services for Muslims in the military, police force, and hospitals, despite a complaint filed the previous year with the president and his cabinet.

One of the civil society positions on the Independent National Electoral Commission continued to be reserved for a member of the clergy.

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

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, members of their community were sometimes targeted by members of other groups, in particular some members of the Lega tribe, for refusing to participate in traditional Kimbilikiti rituals.

On October 2, Kibuya Matangi, a 60-year-old Jehovah's Witness woman, was stabbed to death by villagers in Bulungu, Kwilu Province, after refusing to consult a traditional healer. Matangi reported previously receiving death threats because of her refusal on religious grounds to participate in customary exorcism practices. Local authorities arrested four individuals, including family members, thought to have been complicit in the killing, but the two main suspects, including the chief of the local community, remained at large and the case was ongoing at year's end.

On August 3, a court convicted and sentenced to life in prison Jedidia Mwanga for the 2015 killing of a Jehovah's Witness, Kinglejeji Mukoso, for allegedly refusing to consult a traditional healer. A second Jehovah's Witness was injured in the attack. The court also ordered Mwanga to pay reparations to the victim's family.

In late September a Muslim man killed a Christian woman in a financial dispute in Katale, South Kivu Province. According to a local Muslim leader, as retribution for the killing, the woman's family, along with other members of the local Christian community, burned down two local mosques in early October.

On November 8, local media reported members of the Lega ethnic group in Kindu, Maniema Province, had targeted village members, including Jehovah's Witnesses, who refused to participate in traditional Kimbilikiti initiation rituals. Kimbilikiti followers reportedly raped two women and beat several members of local Jehovah's Witness families. The group also destroyed a local Jehovah's Witness worship hall, assaulted two individuals, and robbed and destroyed the homes of three Jehovah's Witness families. On November 9, local police with reinforcements from the FARDC arrested 12 people in connection with the attacks. The governor and mayor both later visited to assess damages.

On July 29, three men assaulted Bernard Nzela, a Jehovah's Witness in Makalanga, South Kivu Province, and kidnapped his son because they reportedly refused to participate in or support local Kimbilikiti initiation rituals. Nzela was temporarily hospitalized for his injuries.

Some religious leaders reported continued tensions between Christian and Muslim communities in the eastern part of the country linked to the government's ongoing fight against the ADF.

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

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives met regularly with the government to discuss issues of religious freedom, such as government attitudes and actions toward religious organizations. The Ambassador and embassy representatives regularly urged the government and other community and political leaders to refrain from violence and respect the rights of civil society, including religious groups, to assemble and express themselves freely.

The embassy also discussed these issues with religious leaders, particularly in the eastern part of the country, and human rights organizations and used social media to highlight religious freedom issues and promote tolerance. The U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with Conference of Catholic Bishops leaders during their visit to Washington, D.C. in April to discuss the political advocacy of the Catholic Church.

To address the role of religious groups in promoting religious tolerance and general peacebuilding efforts, the embassy included members of different religious groups on professional exchange programs to the United States. For example, the

head of the Muslim community in Goma was selected to attend a program focused on using interfaith dialogue to support peace efforts.