



Central African Republic

International Religious Freedom Report 2002

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion but establishes fixed legal conditions and prohibits what the Government considers religious fundamentalism or intolerance. The constitutional provision prohibiting religious fundamentalism is understood widely to be aimed at Muslims. In practice the Government permits adherents of all religions to worship without interference.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report; however, in October 2001, the Government closed one church due to political differences with its founder.

Although in general there is religious tolerance among members of different religious groups, there were several reported mob killings of persons suspected of practicing witchcraft during the period covered by this report. There also were occasional reports that villagers believed to be witches were harassed or beaten.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 242,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 3.5 million, of which an estimated 690,000 live in the capital, Bangui. Approximately 50 percent of the population are Christian, approximately 15 percent are Muslim, and approximately 35 percent practice traditional indigenous religions or no religion. Most Christians also practice some aspects of traditional indigenous religions. The Government does not keep data on the number of nontraditional religious groups in the country, and there is no data available on active participation in formal religious services or rituals. There is anecdotal evidence of an increase in conversions to Islam by younger persons.

In general immigrants and foreign nationals in the country who practice a particular religion characterize themselves as Catholic, Protestant, or Muslim.

There are many missionary groups operating in the country, such as the Lutherans, Baptists, Catholics, Grace Brethren, and Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as missionaries from Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and other African countries.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion but establishes fixed legal conditions and prohibits what the Government considers religious fundamentalism or intolerance. The constitutional provision prohibiting religious fundamentalism is understood widely to be aimed at Muslims. In practice the Government permits adherents of all religions to worship without interference. There is no state religion. There is no indication that the Government favors any particular religion; however, during the period covered by this report, at least one minority religion complained that the Government granted free time each week on the official radio station to Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim speakers, but required the representatives of smaller religions to pay.

Religious groups (except for traditional indigenous religious groups) are required by law to register with the Ministry of Interior. This registration is free and confers official recognition and certain limited benefits, such as customs duty exemption for the importation of vehicles or equipment, but does not confer a general tax exemption. The administrative police of the Ministry of Interior keep track of groups that have failed to register; however, the police have not attempted to impose any penalty on such groups.

Religious organizations and missionary groups are free to proselytize, worship, and construct places of worship.

Although the Government does not prohibit explicitly religious instruction in public schools, religious instruction is not a part of the overall public school curriculum. There are approximately 12 Catholic schools in Bangui.

Religious holidays celebrated as national holidays include Christmas, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, the Monday after Pentecost, and All Saints Day.

In the past, the Government has taken positive steps to promote interfaith dialog, including organizing interfaith Masses to promote peace.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Any religious or nonreligious group that the Government considers subversive is subject to sanctions. The Ministry of Interior may decline to register, suspend the operations of, or ban any organization that it deems offensive to public morals or likely to disturb the peace. The Ministry of Interior also may intervene to resolve internal conflicts about property, finances, or leadership within religious groups. The Government has banned the Unification Church since the mid-1980's as a subversive organization likely to disturb the peace, specifically in connection with alleged paramilitary training of young church members.

On October 26, 2001, President Ange-Felix Patasse fired General Francois Bozize, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces. The following week, government forces closed a Christian church that Bozize cofounded and operated. The church remained closed at the end of the period covered by this report.

The practice of witchcraft is a criminal offense under the Penal Code; however, persons generally are prosecuted for this offense only in conjunction with some other offense, such as murder. Witchcraft traditionally has been a common explanation for diseases of which the causes were unknown. Although many traditional indigenous religions include or accommodate belief in the efficacy of witchcraft, they generally approve of harmful witchcraft only for defensive or retaliatory purposes and purport to offer protection against it. The practice of witchcraft is understood widely to encompass attempts to harm others not only by magic, but also by covert means of established efficacy such as poisons.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In October 2001, in Bangui, the Mixed Commission of Judicial Inquiry arrested Father Tonino Falagoista, director of the Catholic radio station Radio Notre Dame. After the May 28, 2001, coup attempt, Radio Notre Dame broadcast a report that criticized the killing of members of the Yakoma ethnic group during and following the coup attempt and alleged that there were three mass graves of victims of the security forces in Bangui. Falagoista, who reportedly was arrested because he had failed to send the Commission a written denial that he had authored or approved the broadcast, was released in December 2001.

Unlike in the period covered by the previous report, there were no reports that Muslim Chadian commercial traders were being attacked in the commercial section of Bangui. Although the attacks in the past were commercially motivated, they seemed to be aggravated and tolerated because the Chadians are Muslims. It was unclear if the attacks were perpetrated by police or private citizens.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Although in general there is religious tolerance among members of different religious groups, there have been occasional reports that some villagers who were believed to be witches were harassed, beaten, or sometimes killed by neighbors. Courts have tried, convicted, and sentenced some persons for crimes of violence against suspected witches. There were several reported mob killings of persons suspected of practicing witchcraft during the period covered by this report. For example, *Le Citoyen* newspaper reported that on July 14, 2001, an angry mob killed two elderly women suspected of practicing witchcraft; no action was taken in the case by the end of the period covered by this report.

During the period covered by this report, bandits attacked missionaries on several occasions. For example, in January 2002 in Yaloke and in February 2002 in Bangassou, armed bandits broke into the residences of missionary families and stole money, radios, and other items at gunpoint. The motive for the attacks is believed to be criminal rather than religious. Investigations into both incidents were conducted; however, no arrests were made. On October 25, 2001, armed highway bandits stopped a vehicle near Grimari carrying several missionaries. The bandits assaulted and injured one of the missionaries and looted the vehicle; government soldiers arrived 2 hours later, shot at and dispersed the bandits. There were no arrests or reports of any action taken against the perpetrators.

The Government conducted a full investigation into the February 2000 cases in which armed bandits attacked vehicles transporting religious personnel, killing one nun and injuring another; however, no further action was taken during the period covered by this report, and the results of the investigation were not released publicly.

When serious social or political conflicts have arisen, simultaneous prayer ceremonies have been held in churches, temples, and mosques to ask for divine assistance. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace often conducts developmental and educational programs and seminars throughout the country. The members work closely with other church groups and social organizations on social issues. Unlike in the period covered by the previous report, there were no large-scale ecumenical services.

There were no developments, and there are unlikely to be any, in the case of the six armed men, alleged to be soldiers from the DRC, who in 1999 allegedly raped three foreign nuns at their residence in Bangassou, near the border with the DRC, and beat a local priest.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The Embassy maintains contact with religious groups, especially American missionaries in the country, and monitors human rights developments. In October 2001, Embassy personnel met with the Imam of Bangui and his council to facilitate greater understanding between the Muslim community and the U.S. Government.

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