

ANGOLA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government and encouraged the government to permit Muslims and members of other minority religious groups to worship freely. The embassy maintained open and regular contact with various religious groups, including some the government does not legally recognize.

Section I. Religious Demography

The government estimates the population to be approximately 20 million. The last official census was in 1970. The majority of the population is Christian. The Roman Catholic Church estimates that 55 percent of the population is Catholic, while the government estimates that 70 percent is. The National Institute for Religious Affairs estimates 25 percent of the population combines Christian and traditional beliefs; 10 percent is Protestant, including Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Congregationalists (United Church of Christ), and Assemblies of God; and 5 percent belongs to Brazilian evangelical churches. A small portion of the rural population practices animism or indigenous religious beliefs. There is a small Muslim community, unofficially estimated at 80,000 to 90,000, most of whom are migrants from West Africa or of Lebanese origin. Some Muslim sources put these figures closer to 500,000, but it is not possible to confirm the estimate.

There are approximately 450 to 500 Jews, primarily Israelis.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution defines the country as a secular state, separating church and state. The state recognizes and respects different religious groups, which are free to organize and carry out their activities if they abide by the constitution and laws. The constitution also provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship, and provides the right to be a conscientious objector.

Religious groups must petition for legal status with the justice and culture ministries. Legal status gives religious groups the right to act as juridical persons in the court system, secures their standing as officially registered religious groups, and allows them to construct schools and places of worship. By law, a religious group must have over 100,000 members and be present in 12 of the 18 provinces to gain legal status. Religious leaders must provide information on their group's doctrine or philosophy, organizational structure, and physical location.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, All Souls Day, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom; however, the government imposed restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups.

The high membership threshold for religious groups to acquire legal status restricted registration. The government continued to recognize 83 registered religious groups, but did not register any new groups. The government last registered a new group in 2004. More than 900 organizations have applied unsuccessfully for legal recognition since 1991. The government has not granted legal status to any Muslim groups. Over 2,000 organizations reportedly continued to operate without legal status. The government generally permitted these organizations to exist, function, and grow without legal recognition.

In April the government held a workshop to discuss concerns about the reported proliferation of nontraditional religious groups and beliefs (i.e., other than mainstream Christian groups traditionally present in the country). The workshop identified some religious groups known to accuse children of witchcraft or to accept payments for faith healing.

Muslim group leaders reported Muslims could not practice Islam freely because the government did not recognize Islam and selectively intervened to close

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mosques, schools, and community centers. Although government officials asserted the government protected religious groups without legal status and did not have a policy to close mosques or other Islamic facilities, there were several reports of local authorities closing mosques or preventing their construction.

In January local police in Dundo, Lunda Norte Province, reportedly twice prevented a Muslim group from building a mosque, although the group had a license to build one. Police allegedly destroyed the mosque's foundation at one location, directing the group to build elsewhere. When construction began at the new site, however, police again reportedly demolished the work and told the group that it could not build a mosque at all.

In May in Kuito, Bie Province, the National Criminal Investigation Police (DNIC) reportedly chained the doors on a large residential/commercial building used as a mosque by local Muslims. The DNIC representative allegedly said he had orders to close the building and told the Muslim community it could not continue to pray there. Muslim leaders from Kuito and Luanda wrote repeated letters to DNIC authorities, but received no response. At year's end there was no resolution.

Government agencies, religious groups, and civil society organizations continued campaigns against indigenous religious practices involving shamans, animal sacrifices, or "witchcraft." The stated goal of these campaigns was to discourage abusive practices that included willful neglect or physical abuse, particularly of women, children, and the elderly. According to the National Institute for Religious Affairs (INAR), cases of abusive practices diminished significantly due to the campaigns and government directives.

In October local authorities closed 19 unregistered churches in Namibe Province. The government claimed the unlicensed churches were operating out of people's homes, often as a means to make money.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Members of civil society criticized the Catholic Church for having a close connection to the ruling party. The criticism focused on prominent Catholic leaders' public support for the ruling People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola – Labor Party (MPLA) during the August presidential elections and the

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alleged preferential treatment, including funding, the MPLA gave the church in return.

There was general societal unease concerning smaller, newer religious groups, such as the many small “family churches” opened in recent years, often with no more than a dozen members. Observers from longer-established religious groups accused the founders of these small churches of profit seeking. Critics stated that leaders of some family churches exploited the poorest segment of the population and demanded tens or hundreds of dollars in tithing in exchange for promises of long life, prosperity, or miracles. Critics also maintained some religious groups created their own nongovernmental organizations with profits going to the pastors instead of helping the poor.

Religious and other social leaders occasionally criticized Islam in meetings or to the press. In April a participant at a government-sponsored workshop on the growth of non-traditional (i.e., not mainstream Christian) religions declared Islam was not welcome in Angola. In June an online newspaper posted an opinion piece titled “In Defense of Christianity in Angola: Islam is the Seed of Ruin.” Dozens of reader comments supported the view.

The press frequently criticized immigrants from the Democratic Republic of Congo for importing nontraditional, syncretic faiths and accused them of abuse and witchcraft.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with government officials and encouraged the government to allow Muslims to worship freely and build mosques. Embassy staff also discussed with members of civil society and government officials concerns about traditional beliefs and customs potentially leading to abusive practices that include willful neglect or physical abuse. Embassy representatives encouraged the government to respect its citizens’ religious beliefs while discouraging the practice of blaming vulnerable citizens (particularly women, children, and the elderly) for social or economic problems.

The embassy maintained open and regular contact with many religious groups, including some not legally recognized by the government. Embassy officials spoke of religious tolerance and respect during the Eid al-Adha ceremony at a mosque in Luanda. In private conversations and meetings, embassy staff

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encouraged representatives of Muslim and Christian groups to interact more frequently and seek to support each other through interfaith dialogue.