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Central African Republic

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections, although the constitution prohibits what the government considers religious fundamentalism or intolerance. Witchcraft is a criminal offense under the penal code.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Private actors continued to abuse and discriminate against those accused of witchcraft; however, these accusations generally arose from personal disputes, not from specific religious or cultural practices. Muslims also reported harassment and discrimination, although this usually arose from personal and social disputes rather than government policy.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 242,000 square miles and a population of 4.3 million. According to the 2003 census, Protestants constitute 51 percent of the population, Catholics 29 percent, and Muslims 15 percent. The remainder practices indigenous beliefs (animism), although many indigenous beliefs are also incorporated into Christian and Islamic practice throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections, although the constitution prohibits what the government considers religious fundamentalism or intolerance. Witchcraft is a criminal offense under the penal code. The government generally permitted adherents of all religious groups to worship without interference.

The constitutional provision prohibiting religious fundamentalism was widely perceived as targeting Muslims; however, the provision was not supported by any additional legislation.

The law requires religious groups, except for indigenous religious groups, to register with the Ministry of Interior (MOI). Registration is free and confers official recognition and certain limited benefits, such as customs duty exemption for the importation of vehicles or equipment. No groups formally registered with the government during the reporting period. The administrative police of the MOI monitored groups that failed to register; however, the police did not attempt to impose any penalty on such groups.

The government maintained strict legal requirements that restricted registration of new religious groups. The MOI requires religious groups to prove they have a minimum of 1,000 members and leaders who graduated from what the government considered to be high-caliber religious schools.

The MOI showed some flexibility towards provisions related to the minimum number of members and the level of a religious leader's education. For instance, when an established religious group that existed in other countries arrived, the ministry did not systematically require a minimum number of 1,000 members before authorizing its activities. Additionally the ministry accepted most religious leaders without the mandated education level if a sufficient number of followers existed.

The MOI may decline to register any religious group it deems offensive to public morale or likely to disturb social peace. Registered religious groups later characterized as subversive may face suspension of their operations. The MOI did not refuse any application from new religious groups during the reporting period.

The 2009 penal code maintains witchcraft as a criminal offense punishable by five to 10 years in prison and a fine ranging from 100,000 CFA to 1,000,000 CFA (\$200 to \$2,000). While the new penal code abolishes the death penalty for witchcraft, a new clause states that when the practice of witchcraft results in serious injury or permanent disability, the prison sentence is five to 10 years of hard labor. In case of the death of the victim, the sentence is a lifetime of hard labor.

The law does not define the elements of witchcraft, and the determination lies solely with the magistrate. Women and men, especially the very old and those without family, continued to be targets of witchcraft accusations. During a typical witchcraft trial, practitioners of traditional medicine are called to give their opinion of a suspect's ties to sorcery, and neighbors are called as witnesses. The judge also uses personal discretion to determine if the defendant "behaves" like a "witch."

Students were not compelled to participate in religious education and were free to attend any religious program of their choosing. Although the government does not explicitly prohibit religious instruction in public schools, such instruction was not part of the public school curriculum, nor was it common.

The government grants religious groups one day of their choosing each week to make free broadcasts on the official radio station. Outside this regular time, religious groups must pay fees for broadcast time, just as nonreligious organizations are required to do.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Monday after Pentecost Day, All Saints' Day, and Christmas. The government does not observe Islamic holy days; however, the government allows Muslims to take off these days from work, and government officials participated in Muslim religious occasions.

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Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees, in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

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

Private individuals continued to abuse and discriminate against persons accused of witchcraft. Witchcraft was widely understood to encompass attempts to harm others by magic and established means, such as poisons. Although many indigenous religious groups accommodated belief in the efficacy of sorcery, accusations of witchcraft generally arose from personal disputes, not from specific religious or cultural practices.

Muslims continued to face consistent social discrimination, especially regarding access to services like citizenship documentation, where low-level bureaucrats reportedly created informal barriers for Muslims. Many citizens believed Muslims were "foreigners" and resented them due to their generally better-than-average living standard.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

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