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Central African Republic

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion, 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 government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

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

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion, 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 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 these days off from work.

The law requires religious groups, except for indigenous religious groups, to register with the Ministry of Interior (MOI). Registration was free and conferred official recognition and certain limited benefits, such as customs duty exemption for the importation of vehicles or equipment. 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 stated it 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 already 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 already existed.

The MOI registered no new religious groups during the reporting period.

The MOI may decline to register any religious group it deemed 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; however, the ministry refused to register a new political party, which explicitly stated that its political goal was to defend the interests of Muslims in the country. The ministry suspected the group of trying to promote Islamic fundamentalism and thus opposed the party's creation. Upon rejection the ministry advised the party founders not to focus specifically on Muslim interests, but the party did not return with a new version of its political party's philosophy to request a new authorization.

The MOI may also intervene in religious organizations to resolve internal conflicts about property, finances, or leadership.

The 2009 penal code maintains witchcraft and sorcery as a criminal offense punishable by five to 10 years in prison and a fine ranging from \$200 to \$2,000 (100,000 CFA to 1,000,000 CFA). 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, especially the very old and those without family, continued to be targets of witchcraft accusations. During a typical witchcraft trial, practitioners of traditional medicine were called to give their opinion of a suspect's ties to sorcery, and neighbors were called as witnesses. The judge also used personal discretion to determine if the defendant "behaves" like a "witch."

Police arrested numerous individuals for these practices, often in conjunction with some other offense, such as charges of murder. Accusations of witchcraft appeared unrelated to religious practice and were often associated with personal

disputes. The government reinforced societal attitudes about the efficacy of sorcery by arresting and detaining persons accused of witchcraft, often under the guise of protecting the accused from harm by persons within their communities.

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In late 2009, Bangui prison officials estimated that women accused and convicted of witchcraft made up 50 to 60 percent of female prison detainees. Although authorities freed most persons imprisoned for witchcraft or sorcery for lack of evidence, delays in court hearings often prolonged detentions. As of the end of the reporting period, the government had detained eight women accused of witchcraft in Bimbo prison, with two other women already serving sentences for witchcraft.

The eight room Alindao prison in the community of the same name held 155 prisoners in August 2009 of whom eight were women; all were convicted of purported witchcraft.

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 granted religious groups one day of their choosing each week to make free broadcasts on the official radio station. Outside this regular time, religious groups paid fees for broadcast time, just like nonreligious organizations.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

The Eglise Jehova Sabaot, suspended since 2007 due to allegations of its pastor's involvement in various criminal operations, resumed activities after authorities cleared its leader of wrongdoing and the church was operating throughout the country.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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, who are approximately 15 percent of the population, 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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