



Central African Republic

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, although it prohibits what the Government considers to be religious fundamentalism or intolerance. Witchcraft is a criminal offense under the penal code.

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 period covered by this report.

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.

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 4.4 million. According to the 2005 census, Protestants compose 51 percent of the population, Catholics 29 percent, and Muslims 10 percent. The remainder practices traditional beliefs (animism), although many traditional beliefs are also incorporated into Christian and Islamic practice throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally permitted adherents of all religious groups to worship without interference. The Constitution prohibits what the Government considers to be religious fundamentalism or intolerance. The constitutional provision prohibiting religious fundamentalism is widely perceived as targeting Muslims; however, it is not supported by any additional legislation.

Religious groups (except for traditional indigenous religious groups) are required by law to register with the Ministry of Interior. Registration is free and confers official recognition and certain limited benefits such as customs duty exemption for the importation of vehicles or equipment. The administrative police of the Ministry of Interior 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 Ministry of Interior requires religious groups to prove they have a minimum of one thousand members and leaders who graduated from what the Government considered high caliber religious schools. However, these requirements did not appear to be enforced during the reporting period.

The Ministry of Interior 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 Ministry of Interior may also intervene in religious organizations to resolve internal conflicts about property, finances, or leadership within religious groups.

Witchcraft or sorcery is a criminal offense punishable by execution under the penal code, although most sentences are from 1 to 5 years in prison or a fine of up to \$2,000 (830,000 CFA francs). No one accused of witchcraft received the death penalty during the reporting period, but numerous individuals were arrested for these practices, often in conjunction with some other offense, such as murder. Accusations of witchcraft appear unrelated to religious practice and are often associated with personal disputes. The Government reinforces 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 people within their communities.

In the past, the Minister of Justice acknowledged that investigations into allegations of sorcery were difficult. Although authorities freed most people imprisoned for witchcraft or sorcery for lack of evidence, detentions were often extensive due to delays in court hearings. In June 2008 the Government continued to detain 22 women accused of witchcraft in Bimbo, the women's prison in Bangui, including 7 who had been convicted and were serving sentences of up to 2 years, and 15 who were still awaiting trial.

The Government recognizes Easter Monday, Ascension Day, the Monday after Pentecost, All Saints' Day, and Christmas as national holidays. The Government does not observe Islamic holy days; however, Muslims are allowed to take these days off from work.

Students are not compelled to participate in religious education, and they are free to attend any religious program of their choosing. Although the Government does not explicitly prohibit religious instruction in public schools, such instruction is not part of the public school curriculum, nor is it common. Religious instruction is permitted in private schools.

The Government grants religious groups 1 day of their choosing each week to make free broadcasts on the official radio station. Outside this regular time, religious groups pay fees for broadcast time, just like nonreligious organizations.

The Government continued to take positive steps to promote religious freedom, such as organizing interfaith services for the purpose of promoting peace and interfaith dialogue.

Although it was previously reported that the Government continued to ban the Unification Church, the Government had lifted the ban in 2001 and the Unification Church operated freely.

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 period covered by this report.

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

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 Abuses and Discrimination

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

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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