



Angola

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 481,351 square miles, and its population of 14 million. Christianity is the religion of the vast majority of the population, with Roman Catholicism as the largest single religious group. The Catholic Church estimates that 55 percent of the population is Catholic, but this figure can not be verified. Data from the National Institute for Religious Affairs (INAR), under the Ministry of Culture, indicate the major Protestant traditions, including the Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists (United Church of Christ), and Assemblies of God, are present in the country but are declining in strength, with an estimated membership of 10 percent of the population. African Christian denominations are gaining membership and 25 percent of the population are believed to be followers. Five percent are believed to belong to the various Brazilian Evangelical churches. A small portion of the rural population practices animism or traditional indigenous religions. There is also a small Muslim community, estimated at 80-90,000 adherents, composed largely of migrants from West Africa and families of Lebanese extraction. There were few declared atheists in the country.

Foreign missionaries operated freely throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Government requires religious groups to petition for legal status with the Ministries of Justice and Culture. 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 churches. Groups must provide general background information and have at least 100,000 adult adherents to qualify for registration.

The Christian holy days of Christmas and Good Friday are national holidays with no negative impact on other religious groups.

Public schools do not require religious instruction. The Government permits religious organizations and missions with legal status to establish and operate schools.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Ministries of Justice and Culture currently recognize 85 denominations. More than 800 other religious organizations, many of which are Congolese- or Brazilian-based Christian evangelical groups, have registration applications pending with INAR. They do not meet the membership requirement of at least 100,000 members and are not eligible to receive legal status, but the Government has not barred their activity. INAR reported that the Muslim community, represented by the Central Mosque of Luanda, was close to meeting the registration requirements and was soon expected to gain official legal status.

Members of the clergy regularly use their pulpits to criticize government policies, though church leaders report self-censorship regarding particularly sensitive issues. The Catholic Church-owned Radio Ecclesia is broadcast in Luanda Province and frequently hosted spirited debates that spanned the political spectrum and were at times quite critical of government policies. The Media Law, however, requires nonpublic radio networks to have a physical presence in a province to broadcast there. Due to its limited financial capacity, this requirement affects Radio Ecclesia's ability to expand outside of Luanda.

The Government banned 17 religious groups in Cabinda on charges of practicing harmful exorcism rituals on adults and children accused of "witchcraft," illegally holding religious services in residences, and not being registered. Although the law does not recognize the existence of witchcraft, abusive actions committed while practicing a religion are illegal. Members of these groups were not harassed, but two leaders were convicted in 2006 of child abuse and sentenced to 8 years imprisonment.

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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In February 2006 the Government was criticized for closing three mosques for holding services that authorities claimed disrupted public order by impeding the flow of traffic. Local Muslim leaders worked with INAR to successfully negotiate an agreement which allowed all mosques to reopen by December 2006.

Muslim leaders also submitted a second request for legal status in March 2006, as their first application submitted in 2004 was improperly prepared. The Islamic Church of Angola expects to gain legal status in 2007.

The Catholic Church confirmed that the Government agreed to fund the construction of schools and churches in restitution for property seized during the Angolan civil war.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

Although public attitudes toward Islam were generally negative, cultural differences between Angolan and Muslim West African immigrants were generally cited as the basis for negative views toward Islam, rather than religious intolerance.

Governmental agencies, church groups, and civil society organizations continued campaigns against traditional religions that involve shamans, employ animal sacrifices, or were identified as practicing "witchcraft." The focus of these various programs was on abusive practices that can sometimes stem from traditional indigenous religious groups, not campaigns against witchcraft overall. Various government agencies held workshops and seminars on child abuse while church-related organizations focused on the doctrinal issues related to such practices as animal sacrifices or the use of shamans. There were periodic reports of child and elder abuse stemming from accusations of "witchcraft," generally in rural areas and smaller cities. In some instances these accusations led to exorcism rituals that included willful neglect and physical abuse. In some cases deaths have been reported. Current cases remained under investigation; however, in the past authorities have arrested and prosecuted those who have abused, injured, or reportedly killed others accused of "witchcraft."

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy officials routinely meet with the country's religious leaders on a variety of issues, including democratization, development, religious freedom, and human rights concerns. Church groups are key members of the country's civil society. Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, maintained an ongoing dialogue with the leadership of the country's religious denominations. The Ambassador gave interviews to newspapers and radio in which she specifically called for recognition of Muslims' right to worship in the country.

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