



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Central African Republic

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, although it prohibits what the Government considers to be religious fundamentalism or intolerance and establishes fixed legal conditions based on group registration with the Ministry of Interior. The Government generally respected the right to religious freedom 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.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, certain groups adhering to traditional practices continued to be targets for societal violence.

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 an area of approximately 242,000 square miles and a population of approximately 4 million, of which an estimated 690,000 live in the capital, Bangui. An estimated 50 percent of the population was Christian, and approximately 20 percent was Muslim. The remainder of the population, approximately 30 percent, practiced traditional indigenous religions or no religion at all.

The Government does not keep data on the number of nontraditional religious groups in the country, and there was no data available on active participation in formal religious services or rituals; however, most Christians were believed to practice some aspects of traditional indigenous religions. Additionally, there was anecdotal evidence which suggested an increase in conversions to Islam by younger persons.

In general, immigrants and foreign nationals in the country who practiced a particular religion characterized themselves as Catholic, Protestant, or Muslim.

There were many missionary groups operating in the country, including the Lutherans, Baptists, Catholics, Grace Brethren, and Jehovah's Witnesses. While these missionaries were predominantly from the United States, France, Italy, and Spain, many also came from Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and other African countries. Many missionaries who left the country due to fighting between rebel and government forces in 2002 and 2003 returned to the country and resumed their activities during the reporting period.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The November 2004 constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally permitted adherents of all religions to worship without interference; however, the constitution prohibits what the Government considers to be religious fundamentalism or intolerance. The constitutional provision prohibiting religious fundamentalism was widely perceived as targeting Muslims however, it was not supported by any additional legislation.

There is no state religion, and there was no indication that the Government favored any particular religion. Religious organizations and missionary groups were free to proselytize and worship throughout the country; however, the practice of witchcraft or sorcery continued to be a criminal offense.

Witchcraft or sorcery is a criminal offense under the penal code, punishable by execution. Although no one accused of witchcraft received the death penalty during the reporting period, numerous individuals were arrested for these practices throughout the year--often in conjunction with some other offense, such as murder. Authorities stated that police often arrested and detained persons accused of witchcraft or sorcery to protect them from societal violence aimed against them within their communities.

Most individuals convicted of sorcery received sentences of one to five years in prison; they can also be fined up to \$1,500 (817,836 CFA francs). During a typical trial of someone accused of sorcery, traditional doctors were called to give their opinion of the suspect's ties to sorcery. "Truth herbs" were used to make a suspect "confess." Neighbors were called as witnesses, and because spells were believed to involve burying bits of clothing, sample cuttings of clothes were brought before the jury as evidence. Police and gendarmes conducted

investigations into witchcraft, and according to the minister of justice, investigations into allegations of sorcery were difficult.

Bangui prison officials estimated that 50 to 60 percent of women detainees were arrested in connection with charges of sorcery or witchcraft. On September 20, 2005, for example, Bangui's Bimbo prison for women held forty-four women. The general prosecutor later reported that approximately twenty-three of the women, in addition to fourteen men in the Ngaragba men's prison, were arrested and detained for offenses in connection to witchcraft; of these, five men and four women were sentenced, and the others were liberated for lack of evidence of their crime.

In 2005 a sixty-year old man was arrested for the killing of a twenty-four-year old man, whom he accused of having an affair with his wife, after the victim's family pressed charges against him. According to the criminal court, the plaintiff used sorcery to commit the killing and consequently was found guilty of a criminal offense. He was sentenced to ten years in jail after pleading guilty to his crime.

The Government celebrated several Christian holy days as national holidays including Christmas, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, the Monday after Pentecost, and All Saints' Day. The Government did not officially celebrate Islamic holy days; however, Muslims were allowed to take these days off from work.

Religious groups (except for traditional indigenous religious groups) were 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 which failed to register; however, the police did not attempt to impose any penalty on such groups.

Religious organizations and missionary groups were free to proselytize and worship throughout the country.

According to the Government and nongovernmental organizations, participation in religious education was not forced or required of students and students were free to attend any religious program of their choosing. Although the Government did not explicitly prohibit religious instruction in public schools, such instruction was not part of the overall public school curriculum; nor was it common. Religious instruction was permitted without government interference in private schools. Private Catholic schools, of which there were twelve in Bangui, generally included one hour of religious education per week.

The Government granted religious groups one day each week, of their choosing, to make free broadcasts on the official radio station. All religious representatives that wished to broadcast on public airwaves were required to pay a fee when covering certain activities or making religious advertisements. There were three religious broadcasting stations--two protestant and one Catholic.

The Government continued to take positive steps to promote religious freedom, such as the organizing of interfaith services, for the purpose of promoting peace and interfaith dialogue. President Francois Bozize continued to be involved in religious activities and maintained close ties with a range of religious leaders in the country.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

While government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion, any religious or nonreligious group that the Government considered subversive, a term not specifically defined by the Government, was subject to sanctions by the Ministry of Interior.

When imposing sanctions, the Ministry of Interior may decline to register, suspend the operations of, or ban any organization that it deems offensive to public morals or likely to disturb the peace. For example, the Government continued to ban the Unification Church, claiming that it is a subversive organization likely to disturb the peace because of its alleged training of younger church members as paramilitaries. The Ministry of Interior may also intervene in religious organizations to resolve internal conflicts about property, finances, or leadership within religious groups. Under this framework, the Ministry of the Interior indefinitely closed a Protestant church in Bangui at the end of March 2006 after authorities were notified that two factions within the church were planning to fight each other with knives. Government authorities declared the closure was necessary to prevent violence until tensions subsided. Police made no arrests, and the church remained closed at the end of the reporting period. The Government imposed no other sanctions on any religious groups during the period covered by this report.

Unlike in previous years, the Government did not attempt to suspend or interfere with the activities of religious institutions operating within its legal framework; however, it maintained legal requirements which restricted the activities of some groups. According to the Ministry of Territorial Administration, several of the thirty-four Protestant churches whose activities were suspended by the Government in 2003 (for supposedly being created without regard for official rules and regulations) had fulfilled government requirements to reopen and had resumed their activities by the end of the reporting period. To reopen, these religious institutions had to prove they had a minimum of one thousand members. Additionally, church leaders had to present evidence that they graduated from what the Government considered high caliber religious schools and provide documentation proving that the church was created with respect to local law. A few of these churches did not reopen for failure to meet these requirements. Some observers perceived this decree as an attempt by the Government to regulate the proliferation of places of worship, which had become a trend in the country and a source of concern for the Government over recent years.

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

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, the killing and injuring of suspected sorcerers or witches continued.

Witchcraft is widely understood to encompass attempts to harm others not only by magic but also by covert means of established efficacy such as poisons. Although many traditional indigenous religions include or accommodate belief in the efficacy of witchcraft, they generally only approve of harmful witchcraft for defensive or retaliatory purposes. It has traditionally been used as a common explanation for diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, for which the causes were unknown.

In June 2005 seven residents of Bangui's Miskine suburb killed a woman they accused of being a witch. No additional information regarding this case was available at the end of the reporting period. Although courts have tried, convicted, and sentenced some persons for crimes committed against suspected witches in the past, violence against these individuals continued.

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. In response to political and military unrest in the country, the embassy suspended its operations from November 2002 through December 2004. It partially reopened in January 2005 with the arrival of a charge d'affaires and resumed the monitoring of political and human rights developments in the country, despite having only a limited diplomatic presence in the country.

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