



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Congo, Democratic Republic of the

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The new constitution, approved in a national referendum in December 2005 and formally adopted February 18, 2006, provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice, provided that worshipers did not disturb public order or contradict commonly held morals.

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, there continued to be credible reports that a number of children and elderly persons were accused of witchcraft and abandoned or abused by their families.

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 905,000 square miles, and its population is approximately sixty million. Approximately 55 percent of the population was Roman Catholic, 30 percent was Protestant, and less than 5 percent each Kimbanguist and Muslim. The remainder largely practiced traditional indigenous religions. There were no statistics available on the percentage of atheists. Minority religious groups included, among others, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Coptic (Orthodox) Christians.

Most religious groups were scattered throughout the country and were widely represented in cities and large towns. Muslims were mainly concentrated in the provinces of Maniema and Kinshasa. Members of the syncretistic religion Bunda dia Kongo resided predominately in Bas Congo.

Foreign missionaries operated freely within the country. Missionary groups included Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, and Coptic (Orthodox) Christians.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

Article 26 of the transitional constitution provides for religious freedom, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. During the period covered by this report, a new constitution that provides for the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion was passed by national referendum. There is no state religion.

The establishment and operation of religious institutions is provided for and regulated through a statutory order on the Regulation of Nonprofit Associations and Public Utility Institutions. Requirements for the establishment of a religious organization are simple and generally are not subject to abuse. Exemption from taxation is among the benefits granted to religious organizations. A law regulating religious organizations grants civil servants the power to recognize, suspend recognition of, or dissolve religious groups; however, this law was not invoked in the period covered by this report. Although the law restricts the process of recognition, officially recognized religions are free to establish places of worship and train clergy.

A 2001 decree allows nonprofit organizations, including religious organizations, to operate without restriction provided they register with the Government by submitting a copy of their bylaws and constitution. The Government requires practicing religious groups to be registered; however, in practice unregistered religious groups operated unhindered.

Although the Government requires foreign religious groups to obtain the approval of the president through the minister of justice, foreign religious groups generally operate without restriction once they receive approval from the Government. Many recognized churches have external ties, and foreign missionaries generally are allowed to proselytize. The Government generally did not interfere with foreign missionaries.

Public schools permit religious instruction, and many public schools are operated by religious groups. Religious education is required for all students in religious schools. Parents may choose to send their children to any school, religious or nonreligious.

The Government promoted interfaith understanding by supporting and consulting with the country's five major religious groups (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Islamic, and Kimbanguist). The Consortium of Traditional Religious Leaders serves as an informal forum for religious leaders to gather and discuss issues of concern.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. While the Government generally did not interfere with foreign missionaries, they were not exempt from general restrictions on freedom of movement imposed on all persons by security force members who erected and manned roadblocks, at which they often solicited bribes. These groups were also not exempt from general restrictions or violent crimes committed by security forces. For example, on May 7, 2005, men in military uniform shot and killed a seventy-one-year-old Belgian Jesuit priest while robbing a grocery store. In early June 2005, police arrested and charged five Congolese Armed Forces deserters with the crime. During the period covered by this report, they were sentenced to lengthy jail terms. The victim was in a high crime area, and there was no evidence the man was targeted because he was a priest.

Bundu Dia Kongo, an ethnically based spiritual and political movement that called for the establishment of an "ethnically pure" kingdom from the Bakongo tribe, remained outlawed for its separatist, political goals.

During 2005, the Government banned all religious radio and television stations from broadcasting political and news programs.

On April 27, 2005, the High Media Authority (HAM) suspended religious television station Radio Tele Message de Vie for one month. The suspension followed the station's refusal to give the Government tape recordings of a call-in program broadcast between April 9 and 11 that allegedly "incited violence and rebellion." This particular program edition featured a taped message by Reverend Fernand Kuthino, the station's owner, who stated that the transitional government should transfer power to the citizenry on June 30, 2005.

This ban was revoked shortly after June 30, 2005, and religious radio and television stations operated normally. HAM may suspend stations, religious or secular, for hate speech and calls for ethnic violence.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In eastern areas of the country, where significant numbers of armed groups remained active, religious freedom was not abused. However, as part of the general population, religious individuals and institutions were attacked by armed groups, as were nonreligious individuals and institutions. There was no evidence that religion was the motivating factor in any attacks during the reporting period.

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 religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, many children and elderly persons were accused of practicing witchcraft and driven from their homes by their families.

During the period covered by this report, there continued to be reports of incidents in which persons suspected of witchcraft were attacked, tortured, killed, or driven from their homes. There is a common belief in the region that some persons have the power to cast spells on others; this fear sometimes rises to mass hysteria. During the period covered by this report, there was an increase in reports that certain leaders of revival churches, or small evangelical Protestant churches, exploited the people's fear of witchcraft by either encouraging families to drive accused witches from their homes or performing costly and painful exorcisms in which victims may be locked in boxes for long periods of time, starved for several days, or receive other harsh treatment. Reliable estimates by international nongovernmental organizations working in the country suggest that up to 70 percent of homeless children were accused witches. No one was charged, prosecuted, or punished for such crimes reported in previous years or for crimes reported during the period covered by this report.

Leaders of major religions consult with one another through the Consortium of Traditional Religious Leaders.

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 regularly meet with religious leaders throughout the country.

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