



## Congo, Republic of

### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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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.

While the generally amicable relations among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom, the close link between certain self-proclaimed messianic groups and opposition political movements was a source of tension during the civil war period from 1997 to 2001. In 2003 the Government and the last armed opposition group, the Ninjas, signed a peace accord that greatly reduced these tensions.

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 132,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 4 million. Approximately half of its citizens were Christian; of these approximately 90 percent were Roman Catholic. Other denominations included Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses. There was a growing Muslim community in the country, estimated at 2 percent of the population. In fact, 2005 saw the construction of large new mosque in Brazzaville. Most workers in the urban centers were immigrants from West Africa and Lebanon, with some also from North Africa. The West African immigrants arrived mostly from Mali, Benin, Togo, Mauritania, and Senegal. The Lebanese were primarily Sunni Muslims. There was also a large Chadian Muslim population.

The remainder of the population was made up of practitioners of traditional indigenous religions, those who belonged to various messianic groups, and those who practiced no religion at all. A small minority of the Christian community practiced Kimbanguism, a syncretistic movement that originated in the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo. While retaining many elements of Christianity, Kimbanguism also recognizes its founder (Simon Kimbangu) as a prophet and incorporates African traditional beliefs, such as ancestor worship.

Mystical or messianic practices (particularly among the ethnic Lari population in the Pool region) have been associated with opposition political movements, including some elements of the armed insurrection in the southern part of the country from 1997 to 2001. While the association persisted, its influence has diminished considerably since 2003.

Several Western Christian missionary groups were active in the country, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Salvation Army, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and several Catholic religious orders.

#### 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. There is no official state religion, and the constitution specifically forbids discrimination on the basis of religion.

All organizations, including religious organizations, businesses, unions, and charitable or nonprofit societies, are required to register with and be approved by the Government. There were no reports of discrimination against religious groups in this process, although all admit that it is time-consuming and lengthy. Penalties for failure to register involve fines and potential confiscation of goods, invalidation of contracts, and deportation for foreigners, but no criminal penalties are applicable.

The Government recognizes the Christian holy days of Christmas, Easter Monday, Ascension, Pentecost, and All Saints' Day as national holidays. Muslim holy days are not nationally observed; however, they are respected. For example, employers grant leave for those who wish to observe holy days not on the national calendar.

##### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

In 2003 the Government and the Ninja rebel militia group, led by self-proclaimed prophet Frederic Bistangou (also known as Pasteur Ntumi), signed a peace accord. Subsequently, there have been no reports of abuse or desecration of churches as alleged in previous 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 relations among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Although uncommon, interreligious marriage was generally socially acceptable. Children of majority and minority religions usually sat side-by-side in school. In practice, religion was generally kept separate from public education. Religious tolerance was greater in urban areas than in the rural areas. In some forest communities where there are pygmy populations, there is some discrimination against them in education and employment as well as intolerance for their social practices, including at times their animist religious practices.

All organized religious groups are represented in a joint ecumenical council, which meets yearly during February.

#### 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. These discussions include highlighting the importance of religious freedom with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the presidency, nongovernmental organizations, and members of the national assembly. The U.S. embassy also has implemented programs with key civil society groups that address these issues. The embassy supported four human rights organizations whose goals include strengthening recognition of religious diversity, including animism. U.S. government funding also assisted the local branch of CARITAS, which is affiliated with Catholic Relief Services and local church organizations, and implemented several grassroots projects.

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