



Congo, Democratic Republic of the

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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The transitional constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom in central government-controlled areas during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. In areas not under central government control, respect for religious freedom improved. Unlike the previous reporting period, there were no confirmed incidents of soldiers or militia members attacking religious leaders or churches.

The generally amicable relationship among religions 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 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 a total area of 905,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 58 million. Approximately 50 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 20 percent is Protestant, 10 percent is Kimbanguist, and 10 percent is Muslim. The remainder largely practices traditional indigenous religions. There are no statistics available on the percentage of atheists. Minority religious groups include, among others, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

There is no reliable data on active participation in religious services. Ethnic and political differences generally are not linked to religious differences.

Foreign missionaries operate freely within the country. Missionary groups include Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Evangelical, Mormon, and Jehovah's Witness.

Most religious groups are scattered throughout the country and are widely represented in most cities and large towns. Muslims are mostly concentrated in the province of Maniema. Members of traditional Bunda dia Kongo reside predominately in Bas Congo.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Article 26 of the transitional constitution provides for religious freedom, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. 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 Non-profit 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 in this report. Although the law restricts the process of recognition, officially recognized religions are free to establish places of worship and to 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 operate 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.

The Government promoted interfaith understanding by supporting and consulting with the country's five major religious groups (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Muslim, and Kimbanguist). The Consortium of Traditional Religious Leaders serves as a forum for religious leaders to gather and discuss issues of concern. In addition, it advises the Government while presenting a common moral and religious front.

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, these groups were not exempt from general restrictions by security forces, such as freedom of movement imposed on all persons by security force members who erected and manned roadblocks, at which they often solicited bribes.

Bundu Dia Kongo, an ethnically based spiritual and political movement that called for the overthrow of the Government and the establishment of an "ethnically pure" kingdom from the Bakongo tribe remained outlawed. Unlike in the period covered by the previous report, there were no reports that members of Bundu Dia Kongo were arrested.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In areas not under central government control, respect for religious freedom improved. Unlike in the period covered by the previous report, there were no reported instances of individual attacks against priests, parishioners, churches, parish property, and schools. No individuals responsible for cases from previous reporting periods have been charged, tried, or convicted of wrongdoing.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by individuals or organizations

designated as terrorist organizations.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions 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. Witchcraft accusations generally occur due to financial difficulties, death, disease, unemployment, or the remarriage of a parent. Some of the accused children who are not abandoned are reportedly taken to special religious groups to undergo exorcisms. During the exorcisms, children may be locked in boxes for long periods of time, starved for several days, or receive other harsh treatments.

During the period covered by this report, there was a decrease in the number of incidents reported 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.

Unlike in the previous reporting period, there were no reports of violence against priests or parishioners. However, no one was charged, prosecuted, or punished for such crimes reported in previous years.

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. Embassy officials regularly meet with religious leaders throughout the country. In addition the Embassy awards self-help, human rights, and democracy funds to religious groups for a wide range of activities. Two examples of these projects include a grant to a Muslim human rights organization to train teachers to educate students about democracy and human rights and a grant to a Catholic organization to broadcast radio programs on elections, democracy, and human rights. Also, the Embassy conducted extensive outreach with members of the Muslim community and awarded 22 scholarships to Muslim citizens to assist them in learning English.

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