

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religious belief. On December 30, 2013, government troops reportedly killed numerous followers of evangelical pastor and former presidential candidate Prophet Joseph Mukungubila following attacks by his followers on government facilities in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi. According to the minister of communications, the government was responding to politically motivated security threats. There were reports of security forces harassing religious groups in connection with the government's pursuit of rebel groups. While religious groups were required to register with the government, many operated without government authorization or interference.

Religious organizations became more politically active in advance of upcoming elections, and some parishes and convents reported experiencing political intimidation.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives met regularly with the government, religious leaders, and human rights organizations to discuss religious freedom issues, such as government relations with religious organizations. The embassy held periodic events and used social media to highlight religious freedom issues.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 77.4 million (July 2014 estimate). Approximately 45 percent is Roman Catholic, 40 percent Protestant (including evangelicals), 5 percent Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu (Kimbanguist), and 5 percent Muslim. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Greek Orthodox Christians, Bahais, Jews, and followers of indigenous religious beliefs.

Most religious groups are scattered throughout the country and are widely represented in cities and large towns. Muslims mainly reside in the provinces of Maniema, North Kivu, Orientale, Kasai Occidental, Bandundu, and Kinshasa.

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Although present throughout the country, Kimbanguists are primarily concentrated in Kinshasa and Bas-Congo.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and the right to worship subject to “compliance with the law, public order, public morality, and the rights of others.” It stipulates the right to religious freedom cannot be abrogated even when the government declares a state of emergency or siege. According to the law, the government can legally recognize, suspend recognition of, or dissolve religious groups.

The law regulates the establishment and operation of religious groups. The government grants tax-exempt status to recognized religious groups. Nonprofit organizations, including religious groups, foreign and domestic, must register with the government to obtain official recognition by submitting a copy of their bylaws and constitution. Upon submission, the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights issues a provisional approval, and within six months, a permanent approval or rejection. Unless the ministry specifically rejects the application, the group is considered approved and registered after six months even if the ministry has not issued a final determination. The law requires officially recognized religious groups to operate as nonprofits and respect the general public order. It also permits religious groups to establish places of worship and train clergy. The law prescribes penalties of up to two years imprisonment and/or 200,000 Congolese francs (CDF) (\$217) for individuals who are not properly registered but receive gifts and donations on behalf of a church or religious organization.

The constitution allows public schools to work with religious authorities to provide religious education to students in accordance with students’ religious beliefs, provided the parents request it.

Government Practices

Because religious and political issues overlap, it was difficult to categorize some incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

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According to the UN, on December 30, 2013, members of the 6th Military Region, agents of the Military Police, and Republican Guard soldiers killed at least 46 followers of Prophet Joseph Mukungubila, an evangelical Christian pastor and former presidential candidate, in Katanga province. The government said Mukungubila's followers had attacked government facilities in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi earlier that day and taken control of a state-owned television station, broadcasting a political message to the public. There were conflicting reports as to the number of deaths. The BBC reported Mukungubila told them his followers carried out the attacks in response to government harassment. According to the minister of communications, the government was responding to politically motivated security threats. On May 15, Mukungubila was detained in Johannesburg, South Africa, where he had requested asylum, under the authority of an Interpol warrant issued at the request of the Congolese government in connection with the December 2013 attacks. Mukungubila was granted bail in South Africa and was awaiting extradition proceedings at year's end.

The government conducted military operations in North Kivu against the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), a largely Islamic rebel armed group that originated in Uganda. While leaders of the Muslim community reported they kept in frequent contact with the government regarding the ADF, there were reports that in the Beni area, security forces harassed members of the Muslim community who were suspected of being associated with the ADF.

According to the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, there are currently 404 Catholic organizations, 93 Protestant organizations, 54 Muslim organizations, 2,352 Evangelist organizations, and one Kimbanguist organization registered with the government. Despite the registration requirement, unregistered domestic religious groups operated unhindered. Foreign religious groups operated without restriction after receiving approval from the government.

Catholic, Muslim, Protestant, and evangelical religious leaders stated they enjoyed a good relationship with the government, as the government relied on religious organizations to provide public services such as education and healthcare throughout the country. According to the Ministry of Education, approximately 72 percent of students attended government-funded schools that were administered by religious organizations.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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In preparation for the upcoming local and national election cycle, religious organizations were more politically active, and there were reports of retaliatory political intimidation. On October 12, in Kasai Oriental province, a group of men beat a Catholic priest and, later that night, threatened a group of nuns, warning them to cease discussing political issues after the priest had transmitted a message regarding elections from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (CENCO) during Mass.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives met regularly with the government and religious leaders to discuss issues of religious freedom, such as government attitudes and actions toward religious organizations, and used social media to highlight religious freedom issues.

In August the embassy co-hosted an iftar with Islamic Community in Congo, the country's largest Muslim group. Muslims from around the country, government officials, and members of other religious groups attended. Speakers highlighted the importance of collaborative events such as the iftar in reinforcing relations between embassies and religious communities in order to support religious freedom and religious tolerance. Many attendees discussed issues important to them with embassy officials, including religious freedom and how the embassy was responding to their concerns.

Additionally, the embassy included members of religious groups on professional exchange programs to the United States. In the summer, a Catholic priest attended one such program which, while focusing on governance, touched upon the role of democratic systems in supporting and protecting personal freedoms, including religious freedom.