

ANGOLA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the state as secular, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for freedom of religion. The law requires religious groups to seek government recognition by meeting rigorous criteria. On November 24, a court in Luanda sentenced four Muslims to three years' imprisonment and a fine for allegedly forming a radical Islamic group and pledging allegiance to the Islamic State. Two others were acquitted of similar charges. The government continued to state its concern about the proliferation of religious "sects," some of which the government said exploited vulnerable populations. In his first State of the Nation speech to the parliament in October, newly elected President Joao Lourenco called for changes to the 2004 law on religious freedom and measures to reinforce the separation of religion from business. Subsequently, the Ministry of Culture launched a dialogue with officially recognized churches to obtain input for the drafting of a new law on religious freedom. There are 81 religious groups and four ecumenical associations recognized and more than 1,000 unrecognized religious groups. The government has not recognized any new religious groups since passage in 2004 of the law that requires religious groups to have at least 100,000 citizens as members. The government did not respond to Muslim community groups' requests for government recognition submitted in 2005. Many unregistered religious groups continued to operate with what they described as tacit acceptance. The government encouraged these groups to join associations to serve as interlocutors with the state and exert control over their respective members. During the year the four associations that interacted with the government oversaw approximately 1,000 unrecognized religious groups.

Police arrested three suspects who were involved in an August 26 gas attack on the annual congress of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Luanda, which killed two persons and injured 400. As of year's end, four other suspects remained at large. While the motivation behind the attack remained unclear, one media source claimed that two of the alleged perpetrators belonged to an opposition political party that wanted to punish the Jehovah's Witnesses for not voting in the recently concluded national elections. Some leaders of legally recognized religious organizations continued to criticize the proliferation of smaller, unrecognized religious groups, while they also acknowledged the need for greater religious understanding and interfaith dialogue.

Throughout the year, the embassy raised religious freedom issues, including long-pending registration applications and the drafting of the new religious freedom law with government officials. Embassy officials met with representatives of religious groups and civil society organizations and discussed their views regarding the government's concern with the proliferation of churches and also discussed efforts to promote interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 29.3 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2014 national census, approximately 41 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 38 percent Protestant. Individuals not associated with any religious group constitute 12 percent of the population. The remaining 10 percent is composed of animists, Muslims, Jews, and other religious groups. While the 2014 census reported there were an estimated 103,000 Muslims in the country, one leader of a Muslim organization stated there could be as many as 800,000. His figure includes an unknown number of Muslim migrants mainly from North and West African countries. There are approximately 350 Jews in country, primarily foreign residents.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the state as secular and prohibits religious discrimination. The constitution requires the state to protect churches and religious groups as long as they comply with the law. The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, and worship, and it recognizes the right of religious groups to organize and carry out their activities as long as they adhere to the law. The constitution permits conscientious objection for religious reasons, prohibits questioning individuals about their religious beliefs for reasons other than anonymous statistical purposes, and specifies that religious rights may not be suspended even if the state declares a state of war, siege, or emergency. It recognizes the right of prisoners to receive visits from, and correspond with, religious counselors. The law establishes that conscientious objectors can perform civilian service as an alternative to military service.

The religious freedom law requires religious groups to register for legal recognition from the state. Legal recognition gives religious groups the ability to purchase property collectively and use their property to hold religious events,

exempts them from paying certain property taxes, and authorizes a group to be treated as an incorporated entity in the court system. To apply for government recognition, a religious group must collect 100,000 member signatures from legal residents from 12 of the 18 provinces and submit them to the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights (MJHR). The law also requires religious groups to submit documents defining their organizational structure, methods of worship, leadership, and the amount of time the group has operated in the country, and that their doctrine be in accordance with principles and rights the constitution. In 2015 the MJHR issued a circular that provides for the establishment of ecumenical associations and the requirements for an unrecognized religious group to incorporate with the ecumenical association. While the MJHR is responsible for registration and recognition of religious groups, oversight of religious organizations is the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture through its National Institute for Religious Affairs (INAR).

Religious instruction is not a component of the public educational system. Private schools are allowed to teach religion.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

On November 24, a court in Luanda sentenced four Muslims to three years' imprisonment and fined them 70,000 kwanzas (\$410) for allegedly forming a radical Islamic group and pledging allegiance to the Islamic State. Two other defendants were acquitted. The defendants maintained their innocence and said they were discriminated against because of their Muslim faith. They acknowledged they discussed religion over the internet through a Facebook page and stated they had discussed writings by a Brazilian Muslim who was detained in Brazil related to charges of participating in a terrorist cell. Lawyers for the defendants asserted their clients' innocence and said that discussing religion on social media and sharing religious beliefs with others was not a crime and was a common practice among other religious communities. In a private meeting, a leader in the Muslim community said that he did not believe the individuals were persecuted for their religious beliefs, and he agreed that they should be tried and held accountable for any crimes they might have committed so as not to cast a negative light on the Muslim community in Angola.

Government officials at the highest levels continued to state concern about the proliferation of religious "sects," some of which were alleged to have exploited

vulnerable populations with limited financial means by requiring them to provide recurring payments or dues to worship or belong to these organizations. In President Lourenço's first address to parliament on October 16, he expressed the desire to change the law on religious freedom in order to reinforce the lines separating religion from business. A few days after the president's speech, the minister of culture started a dialogue with officially recognized churches to elicit input that would be taken into account as the government drafted a new religious freedom law. On November 11, the vice-governor of Luanda Province stated her wish to curtail the proliferation of religious sects that she said operated churches solely as profitable businesses rather than simply places of worship, or were detrimental to social order.

The government again recognized no new religious groups, and the number officially recognized remained at 81. The government has not recognized a new religious group since 2004 when it created the current application system. A large number of groups continued to await recognition despite having submitted several applications for registration. In 2015, the government estimated that approximately 1,300 religious groups were operating without government recognition, some of which were providing education and medical care to members despite having no legal authority to do so.

The government continued not to recognize any Muslim groups officially or issue any licenses to Muslim groups to practice their religion legally. The Muslim community requested official recognition of its groups but was unable to meet the requirements of the 2004 law, including having 100,000 citizen members and a religious doctrine aligned with the country's constitution. In the past government officials had stated that some practices allowed by Islam, such as polygamy, contradicted the constitution.

The Muslim community was organized under the Islamic Foundation of Angola (FIA), which interacts with the government and organizes the mosques and adherents in the country. The FIA applied for recognition but did not receive an official response from the government as of year's end. The Islamic Community of Angola (COIA) is a civil rights organization that applied for recognition in 2005 and also had not received a response from the government. According to the COIA leadership, the high threshold for obtaining legal status, combined with the fact that the majority of recognized religious organizations were Christian, indicated the government opposed recognizing non-Christian religious groups. The Bahai Faith and the Global Messianic Church remained the only two non-Christian organizations legally registered.

During the year the government continued to lead an effort to bring unrecognized Christian groups together in associations that would then receive de facto government recognition, requesting those groups to support actively government requests, such as calls to register for elections, and not to engage in illegal practices. The government approved the operation of four coalitions of Christian churches: the evangelical Christian Union of Churches of the Holy Spirit in Angola, the Protestant Christian Church Coalition of Angola, the National Convention of Angolan Christian Churches, and the Angolan Reviving Churches Council. The INAR stated that since 2016 dozens of groups had joined these associations to avoid closure.

Some religious leaders, civil society members, and media outlets continued to accuse the government of trying to coerce religious groups to align themselves with the ruling party in exchange for authorization to operate freely. In June and July the media reported several instances of national- and local-level politicians presenting the ruling party's platform to religious leaders and requesting their support in getting congregation members to polling places and ensure an atmosphere of peace during the election period.

While religious groups were free to run radio stations and written press, the government did not approve a 2009 request from the Catholic radio station Ecclesia to extend its signal beyond Luanda.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On August 26, seven alleged assailants released a toxic gas among the 7,000 persons gathered at the Viana Assembly Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses for their annual congress. More than 400 individuals were affected, mainly by causing victims, including young children, to faint. Police and firefighters were called to assist the victims, and two persons died. The National Police detained three of the alleged perpetrators, while four remained at large. In one media report, two of the alleged perpetrators declared they were members of an opposition political party that wanted to punish the Jehovah's Witnesses for not voting in the recently concluded national elections. Some leaders of legally recognized religious organizations – Bishop Jose Manuel Imbamba of the Episcopal Conference of Angola and Sao Tome, Deolinda Teca of the Angolan Council of Christian Churches, Luis Nguimbi of the Angolan Christian Forum, and others – continued to criticize the proliferation of smaller, unrecognized religious groups. Teca also acknowledged the need for greater religious understanding and interfaith dialogue.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Throughout the year, the embassy raised religious freedom issues with government officials, including long-pending registration applications and the drafting of the new religious freedom law. In February embassy officials and a representative from the Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom met with government officials from the Ministries of Culture, Justice and Human Rights, External Relations, and the INAR and discussed religious registration and possible areas of cooperation to promote religious tolerance.

Embassy officials met with religious leaders and civil society representatives to discuss religious freedom issues and expanded outreach to religious communities, including the Jewish community. During the Department of State officer's February visit, he and embassy officials met with representatives of the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities and civil society and discussed their reaction to the government's stated concerns about the proliferation of churches. They also discussed the status of pending recognitions, the proposed law on religion freedom, and efforts to promote increased interfaith dialogue.