

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states that the country is secular, prohibits religious discrimination, provides for freedom of religion, bans the use of religion for political ends, and stipulates impositions on freedom of conscience stemming from “religious fanaticism” shall be punishable by law. A government decree bans individuals from wearing full-face Islamic veils in public.

There were reports of increased societal tensions stemming from the rapid growth of the Muslim community in the country. According to Catholic, Muslim, and Christian leaders, however, there were no reports of religiously motivated incidents or actions directed against their respective communities.

The U.S. embassy continued to promote religious freedom and tolerance in engagements with leaders in government, the diplomatic community, and civil society groups. During the year, two religious leaders took part in a U.S. government-funded program that supported community engagement, countering violent extremism, and women’s empowerment. Embassy officials met separately with Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim leaders to discuss the state of religious tolerance and cooperation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.0 million (July 2017 estimate). A 2012 survey by the Ministry of Economy, Planning, Territorial Management, and Integration estimates 55 percent of the native-born population is Protestant (of whom approximately 33 percent belong to evangelical Christian churches), 32 percent Roman Catholic, and 2 percent Muslim. Another 9 percent belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu (Kimbanguist), the Celestial Church of Christ, Salvation Army, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). An estimated 2 percent of the population is atheist. A significant portion of the population combines traditional beliefs and practices with Christianity or other religious beliefs.

Many residents not included in government statistics are foreign workers from predominantly Muslim countries, primarily in West Africa. Over the past few

years, there has been an influx of Muslim refugees, particularly from the Central African Republic (CAR). According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, more than 31,000 refugees from the CAR live in the country, of whom 15 percent are Muslim.

The exact size of the Muslim community is difficult to ascertain. Government sources indicate that the size of the Muslim community ranges 8-10 percent – between 360,000-450,000 persons. The High Islamic Council of Congo (CSIC) reported that the Muslim community is nearly 12 percent of the population, or 540,000 persons. An official government census is expected in 2018.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states the country is secular, provides for freedom of belief, prohibits religious discrimination, and makes forced impositions on conscience based on “religious fanaticism,” such as forced conversion, punishable by law. The constitution bans the use of religion for political ends and political parties affiliated with a particular religious group.

A decree bans individuals from wearing the full-face Islamic veil, including the *niqab* and the burqa, in public places. The decree also bans Muslims from foreign countries from spending the night in mosques.

All organizations, including religious groups, must register with, and be approved by, the Ministry of Interior. Religious group applicants must present a certification of qualifications to operate a religious establishment; a title or lease to the property where the establishment is located; the exact address where the organization will be located; bylaws; and a document that clarifies the mission and objectives of the organization. Penalties for failure to register include fines and potential confiscation of goods, invalidation of contracts, and deportation of foreign group members.

The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools. Private schools may provide religious instruction. The law requires that all public and private schools respect all philosophical and religious doctrines. The constitution protects the right to establish private schools.

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

Government Practices

The government granted Christians and Muslims access to public facilities for special religious events. For example, on September 1, the Muslim community celebrated Eid al-Adha in a stadium on the grounds of the presidential residence. The Ecumenical Council celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation at the same stadium on November 12.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to NGOs and religious leaders, the general population, including Muslims, broadly supported the 2015 ban on full-face Islamic veils, viewing the ban as a preemptive counterterrorism measure.

During the year, there were reports of increased societal tensions stemming from the rapid growth of the Muslim community in the country. Reports from private citizens regularly expressed concern about the potential for rising tensions because of the rapid growth of the Muslim population, especially in Pointe-Noire, the country's second largest city and economic center. Muslim leaders stated, however, that they had not received any reports of religiously motivated incidents or actions directed against the Muslim community.

According to the CSIC, the organization would formally notify the government when it knew of Muslims traveling out of country to participate in religious education or for activities sponsored by the CSIC.

According to leaders of the Catholic and non-Catholic Christian communities, there were no reports of religiously motivated incidents or actions directed against their respective communities during the year.

The Ecumenical Council, representing the Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist Churches, met at least biweekly, discussing a range of topics, including peace and tolerance. The Revivalist Council, representing evangelical Protestant churches, and the Islamic Council each met at least twice during the year for discussions on humanitarian efforts, social action, and assistance to vulnerable persons. In October the Ecumenical Council organized an Interfaith Week that brought religious organizations together to promote mutual understanding, interreligious dialogue, and tolerance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. embassy raised the issue of countering religious extremism, in addition to promoting the value of religious tolerance, during meetings held with high-ranking officials at the Ministries of Justice, Social Affairs and Humanitarian Action, and Interior. The embassy used public diplomacy tools, including social media platforms, to highlight religious engagement and the promotion of religious tolerance.

Embassy officials met with civil society and religious groups to enhance interreligious cooperation. In January the embassy sponsored a female pastor for an exchange visit to the U.S. with a focus on women's empowerment, countering violent extremism, and peacebuilding. In April the embassy sponsored an imam for an exchange visit to the U.S. centered on community engagement and countering extremism. In May embassy officials visited a medical clinic for Muslims to reinforce engagement with Muslim community leaders. In August the embassy hosted a roundtable discussion with Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim community leaders to discuss societal issues, such as shifting demographics, religious tolerance, and interfaith dialogue. In May, September, and October, embassy officials met separately with Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim leaders to discuss the state of religious tolerance, encourage cooperation, and seek new methods of collaboration.