

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and equal protection under the law regardless of religion. It prohibits all forms of religious intolerance and “religious fundamentalism.” The law also requires the head of state to take an oath of office that includes a promise to fulfill the duties of the office without any consideration of religion. The government continued to exercise limited or no control or influence in most of the country. Police and the gendarmerie (military police) continued to fail to stop or punish abuses committed by armed groups, such as killings, physical abuse, and gender-based violence, including those based on religious affiliation, according to human rights organizations. The government and the country’s armed groups continued their efforts to implement the 2019 Political Accord for Peace and Reconciliation (APPR), including an agreement to safeguard places of worship from violent attacks. Civilians, however, were still plagued by atrocities and crimes by nonstate actors. In January, after public consultations, the National Assembly passed a law that created a Truth, Justice, Reparations, and Reconciliation Commission in support of the APPR. As of September, the Special Criminal Court (SCC), established in 2018 in Bangui to investigate serious human rights violations, some of which were related to religious identity, announced that it had received 122 complaints and had opened a preliminary investigation on one case. During the year the Bangui Criminal Court for the first time convicted militia leaders for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The case involved leaders of five predominantly Christian militias who perpetrated an attack against Muslims in Bangassou in 2017 in which dozens of persons were killed.

Registering for the December general election process posed challenges for religious minorities, according to international observers. Clashes between armed groups continued to threaten the safety of religious groups.

Many Muslims, the principal religious minority in the country, remained displaced in the western part of the country, where according to media reports, they were not allowed to practice their religion freely. In September, Bishop Nestor Nongo-Aziagbia, president of the country’s Catholic Bishops’ Conference, said the armed groups were rearming, despite their commitments to the APPR. He stated the country’s religious leaders were united for peace. Muslims continued to report social discrimination and marginalization, including difficulties acquiring identification documents, and security concerns. According to Al Jazeera, individuals accused of sorcery or witchcraft, many of them elderly Christians,

experienced social exclusion and were unable to attend houses of worship. Traditional and social media outlets continued to feature hate speech, which in many cases negatively portrayed Muslims.

In meetings with President Faustin-Archange Touadera and other government officials, embassy representatives raised concerns about religious freedom and the safe, voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their home communities. The Ambassador advocated for the government to add a provision allowing refugees, the majority of whom are Muslim, to vote in the December election. Embassy officials regularly engaged with religious leaders on issues related to religious freedom and reconciliation. The Ambassador visited the local school of the first two embassy-sponsored student participants in the Pan Africa Youth Leadership Program from the marginalized PK5 Muslim community in Bangui. Embassy officials monitored religious and ethnic-based hate speech in local media and expressed concern about hate speech to local media and government contacts on a regular basis. The embassy gave equal attention to all principal religious holidays on social media. During the year, the embassy sponsored the travel of a female Muslim community leader to the United States for a program to mentor women leaders on promoting peace and security.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the Pew Research Foundation, the population is 61 percent Protestant, 28 percent Catholic, and 9 percent Muslim. Other religious groups, including traditional religious groups and those having no religious beliefs, make up an estimated 2 percent of the population. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Oxfam estimates the percentage of Muslims, most of whom are Sunni, at up to 15 percent. Some Christians and Muslims incorporate aspects of indigenous religions in their religious practices.

In the central and southern regions of the country, Catholicism and Protestant Christianity are the dominant religions, while Islam is predominant in the northeast. In Bangui, the majority of inhabitants in the PK5 and PK3 neighborhoods are Muslim, while other neighborhoods in the capital are predominantly Christian.

The 2014 International Commission of Inquiry on the Central African Republic reported a significant percentage of Muslims had fled to neighboring countries. As of October, more than 270,000 refugees from the country, the majority of whom

are Muslim, were living in neighboring Cameroon. According to a November UN report, there are approximately 630,000 refugees outside the country and more than 631,000 IDPs, the majority of whom are Muslim. UNHCR and other partners noted an increase in IDPs in the country and Central African Republic refugees in other countries as a result of electoral violence in December.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion under conditions set by law and equal protection under the law regardless of religion. It prohibits all forms of religious intolerance and “religious fundamentalism” but does not define these terms. The law also requires the head of state to take an oath of office that includes a promise to fulfill the duties of the office without any consideration of religion.

Religious groups, except for indigenous religious groups, are required to register with the Ministry of the Interior, Public Security, and Territorial Administration. To register, religious groups must prove they have a minimum of 1,000 members and their leaders have adequate religious education, as judged by the ministry. Indigenous religious groups may receive benefits and exemptions offered to registered groups regardless of their size.

The law permits the denial of registration to any religious group deemed offensive to public morals or likely to disturb social peace. It allows the suspension of registered religious groups if their activities are judged subversive by legal entities. There are no fees for registration as a religious organization. Registration confers official recognition and benefits, such as exemptions from customs tariffs for vehicles or equipment imported into the country. There are no penalties prescribed for groups that do not register.

The law does not prohibit religious instruction in public or private schools, but religious instruction is not part of the public school curriculum.

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

Government Practices

The government continued to exercise limited or no control or influence in most of the country, which observers said was due largely to the presence of armed groups, including the ex-Seleka, a grouping of predominantly Muslim armed groups, and the anti-Balaka, a grouping of predominantly Christian armed groups. Police and the gendarmerie failed to stop or punish abuses committed by militias, including killings, physical abuse, and religious-based violence, according to human rights organizations. For instance, between March and April, clashes between two predominantly Muslim armed groups from different ethnic groups, the Goula and the Rounga, resulted in the deaths of more than 50 combatants and civilians and affected more than 1,200 civilians in the town of N'dele. Conflicts between the Popular Front for the Renaissance of the Central African Republic (FPRC) and the Movement of Central African Freedom Fighters for Justice (MLCJ) reportedly led to the segregation of their respective ethnic groups in IDP camps in Birao. A Muslim advocacy organization reported it had documented Muslims being subjected to arbitrary and long pretrial detentions by the government when the government pursued majority-Muslim armed groups.

The United Nations Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) remained the only force capable of maintaining security in much of the country, according to peacekeeping experts, but MINUSCA stated it remained hampered in its ability to protect civilians due to an increase of electoral violence and the closure of the main supply routes in December as well as limited resources and personnel and poor infrastructure.

Because religion, ethnicity, and politics were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as solely based on religious identity. Most observers, including the United Nations Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic, described the conflict in the country along ethnic lines, which mostly overlap with religious beliefs.

Thirteen of the country's armed groups remained as formal signatories to the terms of the 2019 APPR, which was originally signed by 14 armed groups, while the government generally followed the terms, according to international observers. Among other commitments, the armed groups agreed to refrain from acts of violence directed at places of worship. The Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation (3R) armed group, however, suspended its participation in the APPR implementation mechanisms in June. In December, armed groups formed a new alliance, the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), which included two predominantly Christian anti-Balaka groups, predominantly Muslim ex-Seleka groups (MPC – Central African Patriotic Movement, UPC – Union for Peace in the

Central African Republic, FPRC), and the mostly Fulani, predominantly Muslim 3R. Experts widely viewed these groups as violating the terms of the APPR and responsible for the significant disruption of election on December 27.

In January, after public consultations, the National Assembly passed a law creating a Truth, Justice, Reparations, and Reconciliation Commission in support of the APPR. The Commission will have 11 members, including four women, with a mandate to promote a national dialogue on the conflicts that have seriously marked the country since independence.

In July, the International Criminal Court (ICC) set a February 2021 hearing date in the case of Alfred “Rambo” Yekatom, an anti-Balaka commander and former member of parliament, and Patrice Edouard Ngaissona, also a senior leader of the anti-Balaka. At year’s end, both men were in ICC custody and stood accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including killings targeting Muslim civilians, deportation and torture of Muslims, and destruction of mosques. At year’s end, no Muslim ex-Seleka militia leaders had been similarly accused by the ICC, despite having allegedly committed similar crimes against humanity throughout the country’s conflict.

In February, a criminal court in Bangui sentenced five leaders of predominantly Christian militias to life in prison for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during a 2017 attack in Bangassou in which dozens of Muslims were killed. The decision represented the first time a court handed down a sentence for crimes against humanity, according to the Minister of Justice.

Religious minorities generally had difficulty obtaining the necessary identification to register and vote in the December general election, according to observers. They said that many non-Muslims did not consider Muslims, especially those with ties to neighboring countries, to be citizens, which complicated procurement of identity documents. In accordance with the electoral code updated in September, individuals living as refugees outside the country, the majority of whom were Muslim, were not allowed to vote in the election. Observers said that without refugee voter registration, Muslims would be underrepresented in the electorate.

The Ministry of Humanitarian Action and National Reconciliation continued public service announcements via radio stations nationwide, reaffirming the government’s commitment to treat all citizens equally. Working with international assistance, the ministry supported locally established peace committees to enhance social cohesion.

Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha were observed for the first time as national legal holidays. The National Assembly's adoption of the law establishing the holidays in December 2019 followed the recommendations of the Bangui National Forum, a national reconciliation conference held in 2015 to promote social cohesion.

The SCC, established in 2018 in Bangui to investigate serious human rights violations including genocide, alleged war crimes, and crimes against humanity – some of which were related to religious identity – announced that as of September, it had received 122 complaints and opened a preliminary investigation in one case. Seven cases were under analysis and three were ready for preliminary investigation. The SCC did not release details of the cases, however, since investigations the court deemed sensitive were still underway. The court said it hoped to hold the first trial in 2021 after judges were selected and sworn in. A Muslim advocacy organization expressed concern that the SCC had no Muslim judges.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

According to media and UN reports, 14 armed groups and militia coalitions, particularly the anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka, continued to control approximately 80 percent of the territory in the country and acted as de facto governments in the territory they controlled. The government exercised control in the capital and its immediate surroundings. In August, the UN and the United States sanctioned the leader of the 3R rebel group for gross human rights violations, including acts of violence, abduction, forced displacement, and attacks on civilians, including religious persons and institutions. Civil society representatives stated that many armed groups included foreign fighters, primarily Muslims from Chad, Cameroon, and South Sudan, who increased religious and ethnic tensions. Outside of Bangui, widespread electoral violence in December perpetrated by the CPC, according to human rights organizations and government officials, resulted in further accusations that alleged Muslim foreigners were interfering in the country.

Three commanders of the 3R armed group remained in custody awaiting trial before the SCC for their participation in a May 2019 attack in which more than 50 civilians were killed. The attack allegedly was in retaliation for the death of a member of a predominantly Muslim ethnic-minority group.

In November and December, Sudanese Misserya nomadic herders attacked majority Goula Muslim communities in the northeastern part of the country,

resulting in multiple deaths and homes set on fire. The attacks reportedly stemmed from the Goula refusing to pay “blood money” to the Misserya after six of their combatants were killed in April.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Many Muslim communities remained displaced in the western part of the country, where, according to media reports, they were not allowed to practice their religion freely.

Religious leaders generally avoided characterizing the ongoing conflicts as religiously based. Instead, they identified political and economic power struggles and foreign influence as the root causes. In September, Bishop Nestor Nongo-Aziagbia, president of the country’s Catholic Bishops’ Conference, said nonstate actors were rearming, despite their commitments to disarmament and demobilization as part of the APPR. He stated the country’s religious leaders were united behind peace and focused on raising awareness around the peace agreement and the December general election.

The Platform for Religious Confessions in Central Africa (PCRC) continued its efforts to promote interfaith dialogue throughout the country. The group remained focused on supporting the return of IDPs and refugees and promoting social cohesion in communities that previously experienced religious violence. For example, in September, October, and November, the PCRC visited Bossangoa, Kaga-Bandoro, and Bria to increase social cohesion, with a special focus on promoting peace during the December national election. The PCRC promoted unity, good conduct, and fair play for all actors involved in the election. The group reported being concerned about hate speech in the media and that young people were particularly susceptible to malign influence. The PCRC noted progress in social cohesion, but Muslims continued to be denied access to worship in some communities.

During the year, Radio Sewa FM, a community radio station dedicated to promoting interfaith dialogue, continued to broadcast programs aimed at both Muslim and Christian communities in Bangui’s PK5 and PK3 neighborhoods. Based in PK5, the station was founded by a local NGO in 2017 with the goal of promoting interfaith dialogue.

Muslims continued to report social discrimination and marginalization, including difficulties acquiring identification documents, and security concerns, which

hampered their ability to move freely throughout the country. Muslims reported being interrogated by gendarmes more frequently than Christians while moving on the road between Bangui and neighboring Cameroon. Muslims reportedly were underrepresented among recruits for state security institutions, despite attempts to meet diversity targets set in the state defense plan. A Muslim advocacy organization reported a lack of Muslim representation in all public spheres, including a lack of Muslims in healthcare systems and government positions. For example, they reported only one member of the investigative police was a Muslim, who did not exercise his functions due to an injury. The organization reported the majority Muslim neighborhood of PK5 faced more water outages than other Bangui neighborhoods.

According to religious leaders, Muslims throughout the country faced challenges within their communities because of ethnic differences, such as Muslims of Arab and Peulh (Fulani) ethnicity. For example, observers said some Muslims of Arab descent considered themselves superior to Muslims of other ethnicities and that Muslims who converted from Christianity were frequently ostracized among the Muslim population. The sources also stated these converts were often prevented from living in and interacting with some Muslim communities.

According to Al Jazeera, individuals, often elderly Christians, accused of sorcery or witchcraft experienced social exclusion and were unable to attend houses of worship. According to a female legal advocate, the penal code does not have an established definition of witchcraft, and the state did not intervene in these cases. In general, district chiefs presided over witchcraft trials; local populations sometimes killed or seriously harmed those accused of witchcraft without legal consequences. For example, on August 27, local press reported that in the village of Barka-Panziin, a 60-year-old woman suspected of witchcraft was severely beaten by her own children and buried alive by local inhabitants. Gendarmes stationed at a timber company 2.5 miles away rescued her. Women accused of witchcraft faced the possibility of sexual violence in prison while awaiting trial or serving their sentences. Men and women accused of witchcraft stated that fear for their physical safety caused them psychological harm.

Traditional and social media outlets continued to portray Muslims negatively. A news article published in September in *Le Citoyen* described in provocative terms the fatal stabbing of a young Christian girl named Mauricia by her Muslim boyfriend, Adam. Adam belonged to the PK5 Muslim community and was described as a “terrorist” by the newspaper. Observers reported this type of anti-Muslim news coverage was common and served to increase religious tensions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings with President Touadera and other government officials, the Ambassador and other embassy officials urged the inclusion of voting by refugees living outside the country in the December election. The embassy representatives also raised concerns about religious freedom and the safe voluntary return of refugees and IDPs to their home communities. They encouraged government representatives to implement outreach activities directed at religious communities and publicly condemn attacks on religious structures and against religious groups. They also called on the government to provide security for all citizens, regardless of faith.

Embassy officials regularly engaged with religious leaders, including Catholic Cardinal Dieudonne Nzapalainga, President of the Central African Islamic Council Imam Omar Kobine, other Christian leaders, imams, and representatives of the Coordinating Committee for Central African Muslim Organizations and Coordinating Committee for Christian Women, on issues related to religious freedom and reconciliation. Officials explored opportunities to broaden religious leaders' access and dialogue with elected officials and thanked the leaders for their positive representation of interfaith dialogue and efforts to help communities heal from violence.

The Ambassador visited the local school of the first two embassy-sponsored student participants in the Pan Africa Youth Leadership Program in the marginalized PK5 Muslim community. Also in PK5, the Ambassador attended an interfaith basketball game to show U.S. government support for religious tolerance. Officials also engaged young former participants of U.S. funded programs from PK5 on elections and religious freedom issues. The Ambassador attended a funeral service for Imam Kobine, and the embassy expressed its condolences to the entire Muslim community in the country on social media. Embassy officials met with imams from the PK5 neighborhood to reinforce the message that the international community is a partner of all who support peace in the country and to exchange views on the national election.

Embassy officials monitored religious and ethnic-based hate speech in local media and expressed concern about hate speech to local media and government contacts on a regular basis. Through an embassy-sponsored program, an organization provided training to journalists on how to counter and avoid hate speech.

The embassy provided equal attention to all principal religious holidays on social media. The Ambassador's regular outreach to the Muslim community to celebrate their religious holidays – among them a large Ramadan donation of foodstuffs to vulnerable communities, including female-headed households, in the Muslim community in Bangui – was amplified on embassy social media pages. During the year the embassy sponsored the travel of a female Muslim community leader to the United States for a program designed to mentor female leaders to serve their communities and promote peace and security. Another young Muslim leader traveled to the United States under embassy sponsorship for a program on nongovernmental organization management.