

# **REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2020 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. In June, all 18 churches closed in 2019 due to lack of adherence to building, finance, and noise codes reopened and remained operational after completion of building upgrades. The government continued to grant Christians and Muslims access to public facilities for special religious events.

The High Council of Churches of Congo and the Islamic Council, with support from the United Nations and World Health Organization, organized multiple educational training sessions on COVID-19 prevention.

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom and tolerance in engagements with government leaders. Issues raised included interfaith relations and COVID-19 prevention. The embassy supported virtual events with religious leaders and youth groups to discuss community engagement and the government’s efforts to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Embassy officials met separately with Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and Baha’i leaders to discuss the state of religious tolerance and cooperation.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.3 million (midyear 2020 estimate). A 2012 survey by the Ministry of Economy, Planning, Territorial Management, and Integration – which remains the most recent data – 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. An estimated 2 percent of the population is atheist. In significant portions of the population, traditional beliefs influence religious practices, including ancestor worship and a widespread belief in witchcraft, or *ndoki*.

Many residents not included in government statistics are foreign-born workers with families that come from countries with predominantly Muslim populations, primarily in West Africa. There are varying estimates for the size of the Muslim community, which is predominantly Sunni. The High Islamic Council of Congo estimates the Muslim proportion of the population to be approximately 14 percent, a figure that includes non-Congolese. The country hosts an estimated 16,300 refugees from the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo, approximately 15 percent of whom are Muslim, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

## **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, including religiously affiliated political parties.

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 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**

On June 24, the government relaxed its COVID-19 restrictions under a nationwide state of health emergency and allowed religious organizations to host services for no more than 50 persons, as long as they provided hand-washing stations and observed social distancing. The Ministry of Interior warned that it would fine and potentially close violators. At year's end, the government had not fined any religious organizations for violations.

Despite the easing of restrictions, the Islamic High Commission publicly announced the closure of mosques for prayer due to the inability to practice social distancing and limit the numbers of patrons during prayer at the mosques. At year's end, mosques remained closed voluntarily.

As in previous years, the government granted Christians and Muslims access to public facilities for special religious events before COVID-19 restrictions began in March.

According to the head of the largest mosque in Brazzaville, members of the mosque housed visitors in their homes rather than in the mosque in compliance with a government decree banning Muslims from foreign countries from spending the night in mosques.

In June, all 18 churches closed in 2019 due to lack of adherence to building, safety, and noise codes reopened and remained operational after completion of building upgrades.

## **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

The High Council of Churches of Congo and the Islamic Council, with support from the United Nations and World Health Organization, organized multiple educational training sessions on COVID-19 prevention.

## **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues with government organizations and officials. Topics discussed included interfaith relations and preventive measures to limit the effects of COVID-19.

The embassy supported virtual events with religious leaders and youth groups to discuss community engagement and the government's efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Embassy representatives encouraged efforts to increase dialogue and communication at the local, regional, and national levels. The embassy supported training of local religious leaders, as well as health and security officials, while coordinating and distributing vital personal protective equipment. Embassy officials met separately with Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Church of Jesus Christ, and Baha'i leaders to discuss the state of religious tolerance and cooperation.