

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes the country as a secular state. It also provides for freedom of religion and equal protection under the law regardless of religion and prohibits religious intolerance and “fundamentalism,” which is not defined in law. Religious groups are required to register officially, and registration may be denied to groups deemed morally offensive or subversive. The head of state must take an oath to fulfill duties of the office without consideration of religion. During the year, the government increased its control over territory with assistance from UN forces, bilaterally deployed forces from neighboring countries, and forces from the Russia-backed Wagner Group. However, challenges in consolidating military gains led to continued instability. International and local observers stated that Muslim civilians were disproportionately targeted, and in some instances were killed indiscriminately, by government security forces and Wagner Group forces during operations against rebel groups in the central and northwestern areas of the country. According to the UN, government forces and their allies were responsible for 46 percent of the incidents of abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law across the country between June 2020 and June 2021, with attacks by the government’s armed forces and their allies against Muslim communities increasing between February and June. Observers stated that because the electoral code did not permit refugees living outside the country to vote, Muslims were underrepresented in the electorate, and they warned that Muslims – who comprised the majority of the country’s refugees sheltering in neighboring countries – could be disenfranchised in elections scheduled for 2022, just as they had been in December 2020 elections. President Faustin-Archange Touadera, a Christian, attended Islamic prayer services during Eid celebrations in May and July. The government also supported transitional justice and reconciliation efforts to address human rights abuses, including against the Muslim community, and engaged with Muslim civil society organizations.

Some Muslims remained displaced in the western part of the country. Muslim community members and leaders reported continued social discrimination, marginalization, difficulty obtaining identification documents, underrepresentation in official and public spheres, security concerns, and what they described as inequality and injustice at all levels of society. Traditional and social media outlets at times carried content that negatively portrayed Muslims. International and local observers described the violence in the country as continuing along overlapping

ethnic and religious lines, with political and economic power struggles as important root causes. Senior Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Muslim leaders continued to promote interfaith dialogue throughout the country. A survey of young persons in the capital, Bangui, carried out by an international nongovernmental organization (NGO), indicated that respondents rejected sectarian and ethnic division and blamed bad governance and political manipulation – not each other – for social ills.

U.S. embassy officials called on the government to provide security for all citizens, regardless of faith, following allegations of a September massacre of Fulani Muslims in the northwestern part of the country. Embassy representatives also continued to raise concerns about religious freedom and the safe, voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their home communities with the Ministries of Justice, Foreign Affairs, Humanitarian Affairs, and Public Security, encouraging government representatives to implement outreach activities directed at religious communities. Embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, advocated for the government to allow refugees living outside the country, who are mostly Muslim, to vote in legislative elections in September 2022. Embassy representatives engaged religious leaders on religious freedom and reconciliation and publicly condemned hate speech and attacks against religious groups and on religious structures. The embassy commemorated all the country's principal religious holidays on social media.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.4 million (midyear 2021). According to the Pew Research Foundation in 2019 (the most recent data available), 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 NGO Oxfam estimates the percentage of Muslims, most of whom are Sunni, at up to 15 percent (2019 data). Some Christians and Muslims incorporate aspects of indigenous religions in their religious practices.

In the central, western, and southern regions of the country, Catholicism and Protestant Christianity are the dominant religious groups, while Islam is practiced in the far northern border areas near Cameroon, Chad, and Sudan. In the capital, most residents of the Third District are Muslim, while other neighborhoods are predominantly Christian.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, as of August 2021, there were 703,373 refugees from the Central African Republic in bordering countries, including Cameroon (46 percent), Democratic Republic of the Congo (29 percent), Chad (17.1 percent), Sudan (3.9 percent), Republic of Congo (2.9 percent), and South Sudan (0.3 percent). Most refugees were Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes the country as a secular state. This legal framework provides for freedom of religion and equal protection under the law and prohibits all forms of religious intolerance and “fundamentalism,” although it does not define these terms. The constitution requires the head of state to take an oath of office, including a promise to fulfill the duties of office without religious bias.

Religious groups, except for indigenous ones, are required to register with the Ministries 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. Indigenous religious groups may receive benefits and exemptions offered to registered groups regardless of their size.

The law permits the government to deny 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 group. 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 and UN forces regained control of a large portion of territory from rebels from the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) militia alliance during a counteroffensive launched in January by government forces, bilaterally deployed forces from neighboring countries, and forces from the Russia-backed Wagner Group. However, instability continued as government forces struggled to maintain military gains, and armed groups continued to prey on civilians. Amnesty International reported that during these operations, government forces and their allies from the Wagner Group targeted Muslims, engaging in killings, gender and sexual based violence, and physical abuse and threats.

According to CNN and the investigative group The Sentry, 14 persons were killed on February 16 at a mosque in Bambari when progovernment forces recaptured the city from the CPC. During this assault, Wagner Group forces and soldiers from the national military – the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) – reportedly raped, tortured, and killed Muslim civilians. Imams in Bangui stated that Muslim IDPs had been victims of torture, rape, extrajudicial killing, disappearance, and theft at the hands of FACA and Wagner Group forces.

Leaders of the Muslim Fulani ethnic minority stated they believed FACA and Wagner Group forces targeted and indiscriminately killed Fulani civilians during military operations against armed groups such as the Return Reclamation and Rehabilitation (3R) and the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC). The United Nations also reported that government security forces and Wagner Group forces targeted Muslim civilians.

Local media reports stating there was a massacre of 40 Fulani civilians by government forces in the Nana-Mambere region on September 7 became a rallying cry for the Fulani community. International observers were unable to verify the reports, which they said they believed were misquoted counts of Fulani civilian deaths during the prior weeks. Local and international observers said they confirmed 12 civilians from two Fulani pastoralist families were killed by government forces in the same area on September 3.

An August human rights report by the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) noted an increase in targeted attacks against the civilian population, especially Muslims, in the central and northwestern parts of the country by government security forces and elements from the Wagner Group (denoted as “other security forces” in the MINUSCA report). Mankeur Ndiaye, special representative of the UN Secretary-General and head of MINUSCA, said, “All parties to the conflict continue to commit atrocities as the

security situation deteriorates, particularly in the provinces.” The MINUSCA report recorded 526 cases of what it termed “abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law” across the country, which resulted in at least 1,221 casualties between June 2020 and June 2021, with attacks by FACA forces and their Wagner Group allies against Muslim communities increasing between February and June. In one example, according to the MINUSCA report, “In the town of Kaga Bandoro, Nana Gribizi prefecture, a Muslim shopkeeper was arrested by other security personnel May 6 and taken to their base. The day after his arrest, May 7, his charred body was found on the outskirts of the town, cut into pieces.”

The MINUSCA Human Rights Division reported that in mid-April, Wagner Group forces and FACA forces targeted the Muslim population in Bria, reportedly arresting and, according to MINUSCA, torturing high-level community chiefs.

In February, the International Criminal Court (ICC) began hearings in the case of anti-Balaka commander and former parliamentarian Alfred “Rambo” Yekatom and senior anti-Balaka leader Edouard Ngaissona. The case was underway at the end of the year. (The anti-Balaka are a loose affiliation of predominantly Christian armed groups.) Both men were accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including killings that targeted Muslim civilians, the deportation and torture of Muslims, and the destruction of mosques, from 2013 to 2014. Ngaissona was arrested by authorities in France in December 2018 and was transferred to ICC detention in January 2019. Yekatom was arrested by government authorities in Bangui and surrendered to the ICC in November 2018. Both arrests followed the government’s May 2014 decision to delegate cases involving conflict-related violence after August 2012 to the ICC.

In May, the Swiss NGO Center for Humanitarian Dialogue supported a community, religious, and victim leaders’ meeting in Bangui to discuss the mechanisms and objectives of the Truth, Justice, Reparations, and Reconciliation Commission, a body created by the government in February 2020 to lead national reconciliation by “establishing truth, pursuing justice, and restoring dignity to victims.” In September, the country’s hybrid Special Criminal Court began the trial of Eugene Ngaikosset, a former captain of the Presidential Guard. Ngaikosset was delivered to the court by government authorities for his role in commanding a unit implicated in the massacres of Muslim civilians in the northwest and northeast from 2005 to 2007.

Observers stated that because the electoral code did not permit refugees living outside the country to vote, Muslims were underrepresented in the electorate, and they warned that Muslims – who comprised the majority of the country’s refugees sheltering in neighboring countries – could be disenfranchised in elections scheduled for 2022, just as they had been in December 2020 elections. In November, a national electoral authority official stated that complications in surveying and counting the country’s refugee population, and difficulties coordinating with refugee host countries, were the main reasons for the lack of a refugee voting provision. Observers also stated that widely held prejudices calling into question the citizenship of Muslims who resided in the country, including on the part of government officials, complicated procurement of identity documents for Muslim voters.

On May 11, President Touadera attended Eid al-Fitr prayers at the Central Mosque in Bangui’s Third District. On July 20, he participated in Eid al-Adha prayers at the Gobongo Mosque in Bangui. During both visits, Touadera called for social cohesion and asked worshippers to continue praying for a return to peace and security.

On March 24, President Touadera convened leaders of major religious groups to discuss measures to block the spread of COVID-19 in places of worship, including by closing places of worship, schools, and the country’s borders for a few months during the year. Religious leaders, including representatives of the Catholic Church, the Evangelists Association of Central Africa, the Islamic Superior Council of Central Africa, as well as members of the government and the Presidency cabinet, welcomed the initiative.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

While international observers noted they believed the government took back significant portions of the territory previously occupied by armed groups during the year, Human Rights Watch and other observers said militias and armed rebel groups continued to foment violence and attack both civilians and government targets, even in the areas retaken by the government. Government control of the territory remained tenuous, and observers noted clashes between armed groups and government forces continued throughout the country. Most observers, including the UN Panel of Experts on CAR, described the violence along ethnic lines – which mostly overlapped with religious beliefs – with political and economic power struggles as important root causes. Members of the CPC rebel coalition included two predominantly Christian, anti-Balaka groups; the predominantly

Muslim Central African Patriotic Movement (MPC), the Popular Front for the Rebirth of CAR (FPRC), and the UPC; and the predominantly Fulani, Muslim-led 3R. The MPC, UPC, and FPRC were formerly part of the “Seleka” alliance of rebel militia groups that claimed power through an armed rebellion and coup in March 2013. Catholic clergy, including Archbishop of Bangui Cardinal Dieudonne Nzapalainga, stated that rather than religion or the protection of any community, armed group leaders were motivated by the conquest of political power and exploitation of the country’s economic resources. Cardinal Nzapalainga stated these views during meetings with the UN Sanctions Committee in September.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslim community leaders continued to report social discrimination against and the marginalization of their communities, including difficulties acquiring identification documents. Members of the board of the Coordination of Central African Muslim Organizations (COMUC) expressed similar concerns. Imams from mosques in the majority-Muslim PK5 community of Bangui’s Third District stated that despite numerous efforts to build social cohesion between Muslims and Christians nationwide, their community continued to experience discrimination and instability.

According to COMUC, the Muslim community was marginalized and suffered inequality and injustice at all levels of society. Many Muslim children lacked birth certificates, since most administrative documents were destroyed during the 2013-14 conflict. At times, this allowed civil authorities to question the citizenship of children with Muslim names. As a result of not having birth documents, many Muslim children could not attend school. The PK5 community, COMUC reported, faced more water outages than other Bangui neighborhoods; COMUC said it believed this was due to the city’s deliberately spending fewer resources in the area because the population was largely Muslim.

Christian burials continued to take place in Bangui’s Islamic cemetery near M’poko Airport, in contravention of a 2016 agreement between the Christian and Muslim communities that designated the area exclusively for Islamic burials. One Muslim community leader described the burials as provocations that were indicative of underlying, persistent tensions between the Muslim and Christian communities.

COMUC leaders said that Muslims were stigmatized and largely discriminated against in the existing political system. They also stated Muslims were deprived of property rights and business ownership. Although at least five of 32 ministers in President Touadera's cabinet were Muslim, as well as National Mediator El Hadj Moussa Laurent Ngon Baba, civil society leaders in the Muslim community stated they perceived that Muslims were largely absent from positions of leadership. Muslim community advocates again said that in their view, Muslims were underrepresented in the civil service and among recruits for state security institutions, despite diversity targets outlined in the National Defense Plan.

Traditional and social media outlets at times continued to portray Muslims negatively, particularly those of Fulani ethnicity. On September 21, local newspaper *Le Citoyen* published an article that described Ali Darassa, the leader of the predominantly Muslim UPC armed group, as the "Caliph."

The Nour al-Yaqin Mosque of the PK5 neighborhood of Bangui's Third District reopened on February 26 following repairs by the local peace committee in partnership with MINUSCA. The mosque had been vandalized during intracommunal violence in 2013 and 2014.

In March, the international NGO Conciliation Resources and its partners – the National Council of Central African Youth, Diocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Children and Youth, Central African Islamic Youth, African Evangelical Youth, and a taxi-moto association – carried out research on young persons' views of the crisis in the country, peacebuilding prospects, and their visions for the future. The research, funded by the United Kingdom, captured the views of 550 young persons in Bangui. Despite suffering recurrent crises since 2013 and dealing with a legacy of trauma, loss, and disrupted lives and livelihoods, those polled expressed optimistic views in the survey, according to the researchers. The study's participants rejected sectarian and ethnic division, blamed bad governance and political manipulation – not each other – for social ills, and professed a deep desire to take the lead in transforming their own futures and their relationship with government.

The Platform for Religious Confessions in Central Africa (PCRC), composed of the senior Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Muslim leaders in the country, continued its efforts to promote interfaith dialogue. The group remained focused on supporting the return of IDPs and refugees and promoting social cohesion in communities that previously experienced intercommunal violence occurring along ethnoreligious lines, such as the village of Ndanjala in Lobaye Prefecture. In

September, local authorities and religious leaders in Ndangala launched a local branch of the PCRC in that village, which in turn organized interfaith discussions chaired by Christian leader Jean-Pierre Soalakpe and brought together 200 participants from the three religious groups of the village: Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives raised concerns regarding religious freedom and the safe voluntary return of refugees and IDPs to their home communities with officials in the Ministries of Justice, Foreign Affairs, Humanitarian Affairs, and Public Security. The representatives encouraged the government to implement outreach activities directed at religious communities, and publicly condemn hate speech and attacks on religious structures and against religious groups. In a press statement, the U.S. Ambassador urged the government to provide security for all citizens, regardless of faith, following allegations of a September massacre of Fulani Muslims in the northwestern part of the country. The United States and other international actors, including the European Union and the United Nations, advocated for amending the electoral code to allow for voting in future elections by the mostly Muslim refugees living outside the country.

Embassy officials regularly engaged religious leaders, including from the PCRC, on issues related to religious freedom and reconciliation. Officials explored opportunities to broaden religious leaders' access and dialogue with elected officials and recognized their peacebuilding efforts. On May 11, the Ambassador met with Muslim civil society organizations in Bangui's Third District, delivered symbolic gifts for a virtual iftar, discussed their concerns, and expressed U.S. government support for the community.

Embassy officials monitored religious-based hate speech in local media and expressed concern to local journalists on a regular basis. Through an embassy-sponsored program, the NGO Intemews provided training to journalists on how to counter and avoid hate speech, including hate speech linked to religion. In August and September, the embassy organized exchange sessions with journalists from various media outlets to discuss ways to mitigate hate speech and fake news. On October 11, the Ambassador chaired a workshop on mitigating hate speech, organized by local NGOs, including the Association of Youth in Movement for the Development of Central African Republic and the Central African National Youth Council. The Ambassador urged young persons to be agents of peace and democracy and to refrain from using and disseminating hate speech.

The embassy recognized all of the country's principal religious holidays on social media. The Ambassador's regular outreach to the Muslim community was amplified on embassy social media pages, along with her donation of foodstuffs to female-headed Muslim households in Bangui during Ramadan.