

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states that the country is secular, prohibits religious discrimination, provides for freedom of religion or belief, bans the use of religion for political ends, and stipulates that impositions on freedom of conscience stemming from “religious fanaticism” shall be punishable by law. Following a February statement by Catholic bishops that expressed “serious reservations” regarding presidential election preparations, the government launched a campaign reminding civil society and religious organizations to remain politically impartial and refrain from commenting on government practices. In the same statement, the bishops criticized government COVID-19 restrictions that they said had prevented persons from celebrating the previous Christmas. In September, Antoinette Kebi, executive secretary of the government’s Consultative Council on Women, told women representatives from religious groups that the prohibition on the use of religion for political purposes was not intended to limit the free exercise of religion but rather to ensure that religion was not used as a pretext to violate the principles of equality between men and women. In October, press reported that representatives of religious groups responded favorably to a request by Prime Minister Anatole Collinet Makosso for their support for the government’s campaign against the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Council of Churches of Congo and the High Islamic Council, the largest bodies representing religious organizations in the country, with support from the United Nations and World Health Organization, organized multiple educational training sessions entailing interreligious cooperation on such issues as civil society engagement in promoting political stability, enhancing the role of women in religious organizations, and increasing citizen participation in democratic processes.

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom and tolerance in engagements with government leaders. Issues raised included interfaith relations and the impact of COVID-19 prevention measures on religious gatherings. The Charge d’Affaires hosted meetings of local representatives of religious groups that were members of the Interconfessional Platform for Dignity and Peace for the Great Lakes, an association of faith groups from seven countries from the region, and highlighted the meetings in social media posts. The stated mission of the platform, which included representatives of the dozen largest religious denominations in the

country, was to promote peace and equal access to opportunity, regardless of religious denomination, and improve the relationship between the government and religious organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.4 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2012 census, 55 percent of the native-born population is Catholic, 32 percent Protestant (of whom approximately 33 percent belong to evangelical Christian churches), and 2 percent Muslim. However, a survey by the Ministry of Economy, Planning, Territorial Management, and Integration, also from 2012, 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, while 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, Tenrikyo, Jehovah's Witnesses, or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The survey estimates 2 percent of the population is atheist or not affiliated with a religion. 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 at approximately 14 percent, a figure that includes non-Congolese. The country hosts an estimated 53,300 refugees and asylum seekers from the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the 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 religion or 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.

A 2017 bilateral framework agreement between the government and the Holy See formalized relations between the government and the Catholic Church. The agreement defined places of worship, cemeteries, and ecclesiastical sites; penal case processes for clergy, property rights, and rules pertaining to use of mass media; education; appointment of chaplains to the security forces; and Church institutional activities providing health, education, social, and medical services for the common good.

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

Government Practices

On October 15, the government suspended wedding ceremonies for all religious denominations for 45 days due to a third wave of the COVID-19 delta variant. Religious group representatives said they met privately with the government to address their concerns regarding the suspension. The suspension was lifted on December 1. Religious services were allowed to continue as long as participants respected social distancing measures and wore masks.

On February 2, the bishops and archbishops of the Catholic Church issued a statement criticizing presidential election preparations, expressing “serious reservations” that transparent, free, and credible elections could be organized under existing conditions. They called for implementation of a series of electoral reforms and establishment of a national dialogue and appealed to international donors to condition their assistance to the country, requiring democracy and respect for human rights.

Immediately following the statement, Minister of Communications Thierry Mougalla launched a three-week-long campaign reminding civil society and religious organizations to remain politically impartial and refrain from commenting on government practices in which they were not experts.

In the same February statement, the Catholic prelates issued a statement in which they thanked the government and societal actors for their efforts to combat COVID-19 but criticized certain government measures, particularly a shutdown decreed during the previous Christmas and New Year’s.

In August and September, according to press reports, Antoinette Kebi, the executive secretary of the government’s Consultative Council on Women, held a series of meetings with women representatives from a wide range of religious groups to hear their day-to-day concerns. In a working session in September with all the representatives, Kebi told them that the prohibition on the use of religion for political purposes was not intended to limit the free exercise of religion but rather to ensure that religion was not used as a pretext to violate the principles of equality between men and women present in the constitution.

In October, Prime Minister Makosso met with representatives of religious groups and requested their support for the government’s campaign against the COVID-19 pandemic. He asked religious leaders to sensitize populations about the disease and the need to be vaccinated against it. According to press reports, the religious representatives responded positively to the Prime Minister, promising to participate actively in the formation of a common front against the pandemic. The Prime Minister in turn told the representatives that he was pleased they had agreed to associate themselves with the three elements of the government’s COVID-19 campaign, “vaccination, communication, and intensification.”

According to local representatives from the Interconfessional Platform for Dignity and Peace for the Great Lakes, Christian and Muslim clergy were allowed access to prisoners during the year.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

During the summer, the Interconfessional Platform for Dignity and Peace for the Great Lakes said it focused efforts on repairing what it described as the strained relationship between the government and the Catholic Church that developed in the period leading up to the presidential election in March.

The Council of Churches of Congo and the High Islamic Council, the largest bodies representing religious organizations in the country, with support from the United Nations and World Health Organization, organized multiple discussion sessions on interreligious cooperation on such issues as civil society engagement in stabilizing the political environment, enhancing the role of women in religious organizations, and, during the summer, increasing citizen participation in democratic processes.

The High Islamic Council reopened mosques for prayer in March after the council had closed them for more than a year due to COVID-19.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials discussed religious freedom issues, interfaith cooperation, and equal participation in civil society by all citizens, regardless of religious background, with the Ministries of Public Security, Justice and Human Rights, and International Cooperation, as well as the government's Bureaus of Cooperation with Nongovernmental Organizations and Public Administration.

In June, the Charge d'Affaires hosted meetings of representatives of religious groups that were members of the Interconfessional Platform for Dignity and Peace for the Great Lakes and highlighted the meetings in social media posts.

The embassy supported virtual events with religious leaders and youth groups to discuss interfaith cooperation and religious freedom. The embassy hosted online discussions with female religious leaders and young women as part of virtual education programming on the importance of freedom of expression, tolerance, and religious freedom. Embassy representatives encouraged efforts to increase dialogue and communication at the local, regional, and national levels between religious leaders and the Ministries of Public Security, Justice and Human Rights, and Social and Humanitarian Affairs, as well as local mayors and prefects. Embassy officials met separately with Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Church of

Jesus Christ, Tenrikyo, and Baha'i leaders to discuss the state of religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation.