

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC 2022 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 Rwandan forces, and forces from the Russia-backed Wagner Group. Challenges in consolidating military gains, however, 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 and Wagner Group forces during operations in the central and northwestern areas of the country. In January, Wagner Group elements, accompanied by local former militia members mainly from the primarily Christian anti-Balaka armed group recruited by Wagner Group to support security operations, killed at least 30 Muslim civilians in the villages of Aïgbado and Yanga.

In March 2022, the UN high commissioner for human rights expressed concern that the government’s response to armed groups “increasingly involves arbitrary arrests of members of already vulnerable communities, such as Muslims and Peuls.” Between February and June, the special representative to the UN Secretary-General reported 42 transhumance-related incidents in the west, where Central African Armed Forces (FACA) targeted Fulani herders, who are predominantly Muslim, based on suspected collusion with armed groups. In May, approximately 20 FACA personnel reportedly broke into a Fulani-owned house and killed 10 civilians in Kowon and Nzakoundou, Ouham-Pendé Prefecture. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) also reported attacks by armed groups in May, resulting in deaths of Christian civilians, and a retaliatory attack on a Muslim community in Ouaka prefecture. In Bangui, MINUSCA reported that FACA elements looted

Muslim homes in the PK5 neighborhood, based on religious affiliation and perceived allegiance to armed groups.

During the lead up to the April Yaoundé Declaration, a regional framework for the repatriation and reintegration of the country's displaced persons, participating powers extensively debated the issue of refugee electoral inclusion but could not reach a consensus on a mechanism to give the country's displaced citizens ballot access. Because the electoral code does not permit refugees living outside the country to vote, Muslims were underrepresented in the electorate and Muslims – who make up the majority of the country's refugees residing in neighboring countries – could be disenfranchised in local elections in 2023. President Faustin-Archange Touadera, a Christian, set a precedent by attending Islamic prayer services during Eid celebrations in 2021 and continued this practice in 2022. In September, the government announced that Mawlid, the observed birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, will become a public holiday.

Throughout the year, the Russia-backed Wagner Group carried out offensive operations in the country's north, northwest, east and center-south. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) specializing in interfaith relations said that local perceptions of the Wagner Group had improved and, in many areas, they were no longer perceived as biased in their use of violence, but rather as applying it universally. The NGOs and local media reported that in some predominantly Muslim areas of instability, mainly in the country's northern frontier zones, residents welcomed Wagner Group efforts, in concert with the local security forces, to reduce banditry.

Muslim community members and leaders reported continued social discrimination, marginalization, difficulty obtaining identification documents, security concerns, and what they described as societal inequality and injustice in many aspects of daily life. At times, traditional and social media outlets carried content that negatively portrayed Muslims as well as Roman Catholics, after the Council of Catholic Bishops refused to support the President's proposal to redraft the constitution.

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 Roman Catholic,

Protestant, and Muslim leaders continued to promote interfaith dialogue throughout the country. NGOs specialized in reconciliation viewed religion as the solution for interconfessional healing rather than a source of instability.

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials 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. Embassy representatives engaged religious leaders on religious freedom and reconciliation and publicly condemned hate speech and violence against religious groups. The Ambassador hosted discussions with religious youth leaders, who shared personal insights on discrimination and intercommunal trust building initiatives, as well as with an interfaith platform focused on reconciliation. Embassy representatives also met with local experts and academics on issues of discrimination pertaining to the practice of traditional religions among Indigenous peoples. The embassy commemorated all the country's principal religious holidays on social media.

On November 30, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed the Central African Republic on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom. In addition, the Secretary of State designated the Wagner Group as an Entity of Particular Concern for having engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom in the Central African Republic.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.5 million (midyear 2022). According to the Pew Research Foundation, in 2019 (the most recent year for which data are available), the population is 61 percent Protestant, 28 percent Roman Catholic, and 9 percent Muslim. Other religious groups, including animist spiritualism practitioners and those having no religious beliefs, make up approximately 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 animist or traditional faith in their religious practices, but do not proclaim them as their primary confession.

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 and Fifth Districts, collectively known as PK5, are Muslim, while other neighborhoods are predominantly Christian.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, as of October, there were approximately 750,000 refugees from the country in bordering countries, including Cameroon (47 percent of refugees), Democratic Republic of the Congo (28.6 percent), Chad (16.8 percent), Sudan (3.3 percent), Republic of Congo (3.9 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 animist spiritualist communities, 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. Animist spiritualist groups, regardless of their size, may receive benefits and exemptions offered to registered groups.

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 under MINUSCA regained control of a large portion of territory from rebels from the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) militia alliance and other armed groups during military operations conducted in 2021. Bilaterally deployed forces from Rwanda and forces from the Russia-backed Wagner Group assisted the FACA in this effort. Instability continued, however, as government forces struggled to maintain control in parts of the country and armed groups continued to attack civilians and security forces. According to UN reporting, government and Wagner Group forces committed human rights violations and abuses including through the targeting of members of Muslim and Fulani communities. The NGO Amnesty International and the UN reported that during some joint operations, government forces and Wagner Group elements at times disproportionately targeted Muslims and engaged in killings, gender-based and sexual violence, and physical abuse and threats. In January, Wagner Group elements and their proxy forces, mainly former members of the predominantly Christian anti-Balaka armed group, killed at least 30 Muslim civilians in the villages of Aïgbado and Yanga during an operation against Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC), a predominantly Muslim armed group. Witnesses reported that Wagner Group and their proxies fired indiscriminately into fleeing crowds and into settled areas. Witnesses described the incident, which included execution-style killings, as an indiscriminate attack on the Muslim community in retaliation for an attack on a Wagner position.

In March 2022, the UN high commissioner for human rights expressed concern that the government's response to armed groups "increasingly involves arbitrary arrests of members of already vulnerable communities, such as Muslims and Peuls." Between February and June, the special representative to the UN Secretary-General reported 42 transhumance-related incidents in the west, where FACA targeted Fulani herders, who are predominantly Muslim, based on suspected collusion with armed groups. In May, approximately 20 FACA personnel reportedly broke into a Fulani-owned house and killed 10 civilians in

Kowon and Nzakoundou, Ouham-Pendé Prefecture. MINUSCA reported attacks by armed groups in May, resulting in deaths of Christian civilians, and a retaliatory attack on a Muslim community in Ouaka prefecture. In Bangui, MINUSCA reported that FACA elements selectively looted Muslim homes in the PK5 neighborhood, based on religious affiliations and perceived allegiance to armed groups.

Nomadic Muslim pastoralists in the country's north faced discrimination and episodic attacks from government forces, who often failed to recognize the difference between civilian herders and rebel group members. According to NGOs, these herders began arming themselves to defend their livelihoods against local cattle rustlers and economically motivated armed groups, which in turn accelerated cycles of violence, community mistrust, and lethal incidents resulting in security forces and agriculturalist communities conflating some of these pastoralist herders with armed group members who may come from the same ethnic or linguistic group. Armed groups intimidated many pastoralists into participating in protection rackets, which also increased interactions with predominately Muslim armed groups by security forces and settled Christian farming community members, reported NGO sources. For example, in May, the FACA and Wagner Group elements carried out an operation against the armed group Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation (3R), during which they killed approximately 12 Fulani herders, who reportedly had no known affiliation with the rebel group, and more than 100 cattle – a store of wealth essential to their livelihood. Local media outlets described the operation as a sloppy and indiscriminate reprisal for a 3R raid which left one FACA member dead.

In June, local media reported a mixed contingent of FACA and law enforcement agents cordoned off a mosque in Bangui during a religious service. Security services produced a detainee who identified several worshipers, including two well-known imams, who were immediately arrested for unknown reasons. The imams and several other detainees remained in detention with no official charges published. Police released the detainees several weeks later and never officially charged them.

In August, a MINUSCA human rights report noted continued 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). MINUSCA reporting documented the proportion of human rights violations and abuses and victims attributed to state actors or other armed groups, with state actors responsible for a majority of the victims. As the number of incidents increased, the number of victims swelled disproportionately, suggesting the increasing potency of state-backed units. Representatives from MINUSCA’s Human Rights Division stated that in remote provinces, all parties carried out indiscriminate attacks. The MINUSCA report recorded 1,110 alleged violations of human rights across the country, which resulted in at least 1,583 victims killed, injured, or sexually assaulted between January and October, and cited various indiscriminate attacks by government forces and the Wagner Group in mainly Muslim-inhabited communities.

In December 2021, FACA and Wagner Group forces used Christian proxies to attack the predominantly Muslim village of Boyo, which they believed to be harboring rebels from the UPC. Wagner Group and FACA reactivated and deployed a demobilized contingent of anti-Balaka fighters who indiscriminately shot, mutilated, and sexually assaulted the Muslim villagers with the logistical support of Wagner Group and government forces, killing an estimated 25 persons and displacing more than 1,500.

The MINUSCA Human Rights Division reported that in mid-April, Wagner Group and FACA forces targeted civilians at a gold mining site in Mandja, whose inhabitants are mainly Christian and traditional faith practitioners, summarily executing 13 unarmed men working in the vicinity.

In July, officials from Special Criminal Court (SCC), in cooperation with members of the FACA and the judicial police, arrested Idriss Ibrahim Khalil for war crimes. (The SCC is a UN-backed domestic court made up of national and international judges and prosecutors. It has primacy over other courts in the country.) Khalil, known as “Ben Laden,” the previously self-proclaimed UPC general was accused of directing and participating in multiple attacks on civilians, including a massacre at a camp for internally displaced persons in Alindao in 2018 that left 112 mainly Christian civilians dead, including 19 children and two members of the Roman Catholic clergy. At year’s end, SCC authorities were holding Khalil in pretrial detention in Bangui, pending a hearing on the matter. Former members of the Muslim majority Seleka movement created the UPC to defend the Muslim

community from Roman Catholics, which officials in the legal system and UN agencies said led them to believe that the victims' faith had been a prime factor in planning and executing the attacks.

In March, Chadian authorities transferred former anti-Balaka leader Maxime Mokom to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague for war crimes and crimes against humanity, and he remained in custody awaiting trial at year's end. Mokom cofounded the anti-Balaka movement, which arose following the Seleka takeover that deposed President François Bozize in 2013. Anti-Balaka elements targeted the Muslim population and others perceived as supporters of the Seleka government during the 2013-14 conflict. As part of a reconciliation effort, Mokom became Minister of Disarmament before turning against the government once again and fleeing the country. The ICC case against senior anti-Balaka leaders Alfred Yekatom and Patrice Ngaissona, sent to The Hague in 2021, remained ongoing. The ICC was also pursuing cases against ex-Seleka leaders, for example, Mahamat Said Kani, whose trial opened in September; the ICC also published a redacted public version of its arrest warrant for Mahamat Nouradine Adam, a former Seleka leader, suspected of war crimes and believed to be involved in attacks targeting non-Muslims.

During the lead up to the April Yaoundé Declaration, a regional framework for the repatriation and reintegration of the country's displaced persons, participating powers extensively debated the issue of refugee electoral inclusion but could not reach a consensus on a mechanism to give the country's displaced citizens ballot access. 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 many Muslims – who made up the majority of the country's refugees sheltering in neighboring countries – could be disenfranchised in future elections, just as they were in the 2020 presidential elections. Observers said that widely held prejudices calling into question the citizenship of Muslims who resided in the country further complicated the procurement of identity documents for Muslim voters.

In August, police in Bria reportedly arbitrarily arrested 100 members of the Fulani community for lacking official identity documents and extorted the individuals for approximately 10,000 CFA (\$16) each.

During the summer, the Truth, Justice, Reparations, and Reconciliation Commission, a body created by the government in 2020 to lead national reconciliation by “establishing truth, pursuing justice, and restoring dignity to victims” conducted a multicity tour to promote its intent to hold public hearings on interconfessional atrocities as a step toward national healing.

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 worshipers to continue praying for a return to peace and security.

In July, the government announced plans to facilitate the construction of the country’s first Russian Orthodox house of worship, although the number of Russian, Greek, or Eastern Orthodox practitioners permanently residing in the country appeared low.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Throughout 2022, the Wagner Group carried out offensive military operations in the country's north, northwest, east and, center-south. In the northwest, NGOs reported that Wagner Group elements focused their efforts on securing access to gold mining sites rather than seeking to defeat armed groups or carry out stabilization operations. NGOs specializing in interfaith relations said that local perceptions of the Wagner Group had improved in many areas, and they were no longer perceived as biased in their use of violence. The NGOs added that in some predominantly Muslim areas of instability, residents welcomed Wagner Group efforts to reduce banditry. In the far north, UN observers reported no increase in instances of human rights abuses linked to Wagner Group forces, which they attributed to restructured operations that placed local forces at the front lines and reserved Wagner Group personnel for emergency interventions. Wagner Group elements reportedly attempted a conciliatory posture with local populations in Vakaga and Ouaka by making Christian anti-Balaka auxiliaries protect Muslim Fulani herder populations in areas they controlled. According to UN reports, however, the majority of civilians killed and injured by Wagner Group elements were Muslim and the group’s increasing recruitment of former anti-

Balaka proxy forces raised concerns, given the militia's record of anti-Muslim atrocities.

While the government established a military presence in major population centers and some of the territory occupied by armed groups in late 2020 and early 2021, NGOs, UN agencies, and other observers said local militias and armed rebel groups continued to foment violence and attack both civilians and government targets. Government control of significant portions of the national territory remained tenuous. Observers noted that intermittent clashes continued through contested areas. Most observers, including the UN Panel of Experts on the country, described the violence as a matter of ethnic identity – which mostly, but not exclusively overlapped with religious beliefs – with political and economic power struggles as important root causes and primary drivers. For example, members of the CPC, the country's largest rebel group, included two predominantly Christian, anti-Balaka groups; the predominantly Muslim Central African Patriotic Movement (MPC), the Popular Front for the Rebirth of the Central African Republic (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 takeover in 2013, which prompted the emergence of the rival anti-Balaka movement.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslim community leaders and international NGOs continued to report social discrimination against and the marginalization of Muslim communities, including difficulties acquiring identification documents. Members of the board of the Coordination of Central African Muslim Organizations (COMUC) echoed these concerns. Imams from mosques in the majority-Muslim PK5 district stated that despite numerous efforts to build social cohesion between Muslims and Christians nationwide, the communities continued to openly mistrust each other, evidenced by increasing self-segregation and neighborhood homogenization, which they said often translated into discrimination against the Muslim minority as evidenced by the frequent lack of sufficient access to public utility infrastructure in their districts. Leaders from the Roman Catholic community corroborated the imams' assessment of mistrust.

According to COMUC, the Muslim community felt marginalized and perceived a high degree of inequality and injustice, especially in their interactions with the administrative state. The 2013-14 conflict saw the destruction of public buildings in Muslim communities which housed official records, leading to a lack of birth certificates for many Muslim children and adolescents. 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. Muslim youth leaders and members of COMUC described challenges Muslim residents faced when registering for the national identity document required to receive social services. Officials often mistakenly or intentionally placed a higher burden of proof on citizens with traditionally Muslim sounding names under the false presumption that they were foreign born. Several community leaders decried higher fees for self-registering Muslims who the sources said were often required by corrupt officials to pay five times the published rate for the same identity document services. They also claimed they were required to produce more documentation than non-Muslims to prove their citizenship and residency.

COMUC reported that the PK5 community faced more running water outages than other Bangui neighborhoods. COMUC said it believed this was due to the city deliberately allocating fewer resources to the area because of its religious demographics. During the year, the district experienced an accelerated influx of Muslim IDPs seeking economic opportunity in the capital, whose homes, according to residents, had no access to running water, sewage, or electricity. Community leaders said the new arrivals believed they would be physically safer in communities of the same faith and wanted convenient access to religious services.

Christian burials continued to take place in Bangui's Boeing Islamic cemetery near M'Poko Airport, contravening a 2016 agreement (widely known as the Boeing-PK5 Nonaggression Pact) between the Christian and Muslim communities that designated the area exclusively for Islamic burials. Although the burial of Christians in the privately owned cemetery was initially seen as a gesture of good will in return for the safe passage of Muslim funeral convoys, after seven years, Muslim community members said that it was time for the national and municipal governments to find a lasting solution. NGOs and community leaders said the situation still had potential to reignite intercommunal tensions. One Muslim community leader described the burials as provocations that were indicative of

underlying, persistent strain between the Muslim and Christian communities that could shatter a fragile peace.

The number of Muslims in senior government positions rose, and reflected the country's demographics, but civil society and NGOs still stated that Muslims were underrepresented in the civil service. At least eight of 32 ministers in President Touadera's Council of Ministers were Muslim, as were five of 50 presidential staff and National Mediator El Hadj Moussa Laurent Ngon Baba. However, civil society leaders in the Muslim community stated they perceived that members of the Islamic faith were largely absent from key administrative and civil service roles. COMUC leaders blamed this on a small Muslim candidate pool resulting from a dearth of schools and educational investment in Muslim-majority regions. Despite diversity targets outlined in the National Defense Plan and an increase in active recruiting efforts, most Muslim members of the armed forces were demobilized armed group members rather than former civilians. Civil society leaders and embassy contacts in law enforcement reported that Muslims faced recruitment bias in the national police and gendarmes.

Traditional and social media outlets at times continued to portray Muslims negatively, particularly those of Fulani ethnicity, although Roman Catholics also faced negative portrayals after the Council of Bishops denounced the President's attempt to extend his term limits through constitutional reform. In one publicized instance, a prominent government supporter and former minister called clergy members "the voice of pedophiles."

In April, local civil society and the United Nations collaborated with government authorities to rehabilitate several mosques and churches, including the central Petevo mosque in Bangui. The project followed the successful rehabilitation of the Nour al Yaqin Mosque in 2021 and was widely perceived as a positive step towards improving social cohesion. UN-funded NGOs and volunteers not only restored the religious structures, but also cleared the land surrounding them of 10 years' worth of refuse and debris. In August, UN agencies hosted a planning session with key Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic leaders to create an equitable action plan for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of houses of worship destroyed in the conflict. The leaders used the forum to express grievances and outline sensitivities pertaining to the location of religious cemeteries and discussed the construction of Catholic schools, which have traditionally educated

both Muslim and Christian students and, according to a Catholic abbot, promoted social harmony. While this demonstrated progress, they said Muslims in country, especially IDPs, must often travel further to access places of worship than their Catholic or Protestant counterparts. The civil war caused the destruction of an estimated 417 of the country's 435 mosques and displaced hundreds of thousands of worshipers. Some local community efforts to rebuild the destroyed mosques continued.

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, promoting social cohesion in communities that experienced intercommunal or ethno-religious violence, and encouraging interconfessional cooperation to vaccinate communities against COVID-19. In March, the PCRC organized public sessions with community leaders to combat hate speech in the restive Haute Kotto prefecture (eastern area of the country). In September, the group sponsored an event celebrating the Feast of Tabaski (Eid al-Adha) with participation of Protestant and Catholic community members.

MINUSCA reported continued incidents of vigilante justice against individuals accused of witchcraft and charlatanism.

Traditional and Indigenous faiths, often described as animist spiritualism, were widely tolerated by regional and central government authorities as well as by the communities in areas adjacent to those who practiced them, predominately the forest dwelling Bofi and Aka peoples. NGOs and anthropologists reported that traditional faith practitioners are not coerced into joining established church groups. Many of the communities who adhere to traditional spiritual beliefs also voluntarily associated with established Christian churches.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials 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.

In August, the Chargé d’Affaires visited the mayor and imam of Bangui’s central mosque in PK5, the capital’s most populous neighborhood and home to most of its Muslims. During a series of engagements, leaders from the small business community and civil society organizations described the fragility of intercommunal relations caused by long-held resentment over illegal property appropriation during the civil war. The leaders said that many in this district believed underinvestment stemmed from perceptions of the Muslim community as foreign. Bangui’s most influential imam told the Chargé that the embassy’s support for religious freedom and tolerance remained a beacon of hope for Bangui’s Muslim residents.

In September, the Chargé visited the offices of the St. Vincent de Paul Association to commemorate its 50th year of operation in the country. Embassy officials applauded the charitable activity of the organization, which provided support for orphans and the elderly of all faiths.

In September, the Ambassador hosted a roundtable discussion with leaders from an interfaith youth coalition. The young leaders were signatories of an embassy-supported nonaggression pact between Christian and Muslim communities that grants safe passage for commerce and cemetery visitation in neighborhoods that had been hotbeds of interreligious killing during the civil war. The leaders expressed concern over the increasing homogenization of Bangui’s once diverse neighborhoods and explained that despite religious leaders’ efforts to promote diversity, families appeared to be self-segregating.

Embassy officials monitored hate speech in local media and expressed concern privately to local journalists and government officials on a regular basis. From July to September, the embassy organized four professional development exchange sessions with journalists from various media outlets in conjunction with journalists from Mali and Benin. Through video conferencing, they shared best practices on reducing the impact of hate speech, disinformation, and fake news. Although largely political in nature, animosity in the media targeted members and leaders of religious communities in the past.

In September, embassy representatives engaged local experts and academics to discuss issues of discrimination and tolerance pertaining to communities that practice traditional, animist spiritualist religions among forest-dwelling peoples in

the country's southwestern region. Embassy officials also engaged remotely with international anthropologists with several years of field experience in these areas to learn more about interfaith relations.

In October, the Ambassador hosted religious leaders from the PCRC at his residence to reiterate the United States' commitment to religious freedom and gain perspective on the health of the country's democracy from an organization with deep roots in the Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communities. The embassy shared photographs of the event on social media.

The embassy recognized all of the country's principal religious holidays on social media.

On November 30, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed the Central African Republic on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom. In addition, the Secretary of State designated the Wagner Group as an Entity of Particular Concern for having engaged in particularly severe violations of religious freedom in the Central African Republic.