

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religious belief. The law regulates the establishment and operation of religious groups. By law, eight major religious groups are charged with electing the head of the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI).

The government did not issue any final registration permits for religious groups; it has not done so since 2014. It continued, however, the practice of allowing groups that had presumably filed registration permit requests to operate, and these domestic religious groups reported they continued to do so unhindered. Foreign-based religious groups also stated they operated without restriction after applying for legal status. Muslim community leaders again said the government did not afford them some of the same privileges as larger religious groups, such as having Muslim chaplains in the military, police, and hospitals.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-Democratic Republic of the Congo (ISIS-DRC), known locally as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an armed group designated by the United States as a terrorist organization, continued to operate in the country. ISIS-DRC/ADF usually attacked civilians, hospitals, and schools indiscriminately in North Kivu and Ituri Provinces, but on occasion it targeted churches and religious leaders. While the violence targeted and affected all communities, most victims were Christian, reflecting their status as the religious majority. On October 19, ISIS-DRC/ADF raided the Catholic hospital in Maboya village, killing seven individuals, including a Catholic nun staff member.

The Jehovah's Witnesses *Religious Freedom Report* for 2022 stated that attacks against members of the religious group perpetrated by a range of actors continued in the interior provinces.

U.S. embassy officers met with officials from the Ministries of Human Rights, Justice, Defense, and Interior and discussed religious freedom issues, including government relations with religious organizations. Embassy officials also regularly urged the government, security force leaders, and community and political leaders to refrain from violence and to respect the rights of civil society, including of religious groups, to assemble and express themselves freely. Throughout the year, embassy and Washington-based officials engaged with religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 108.4 million (midyear 2022). In 2010, the Pew Research Center estimated 95.8 percent of the population was Christian, 1.5 percent Muslim, and 1.8 percent with no religious affiliation. Of Christians, Pew estimated 48.1 percent were Protestant, including evangelical Christians and the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu (Kimbanguist), and 47.3 percent Roman Catholic. There are approximately 60 Protestant denominations. Other Christian groups include Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and the Greek and Independent Orthodox Churches. There are small communities of Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, and followers of indigenous religions. In contrast to the Pew estimate, Muslim leaders estimate their community currently makes up approximately 5 percent of the population.

A significant portion of the population combines traditional beliefs and practices with Christianity or other religious beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and the right to worship, subject to "compliance with the law, public order, public morality, and the rights of others." It stipulates the right to religious

freedom may not be abrogated even when the government declares a state of emergency or siege.

The law regulates the establishment and operation of religious groups. According to law, the government may legally recognize, suspend recognition of, or dissolve religious groups. The government grants tax-exempt status to recognized religious groups. Nonprofit organizations, including foreign and domestic religious groups, must register with the government to obtain official recognition by submitting a copy of their bylaws and constitution. Religious groups are required to register only once for the group as a whole, but nonprofit organizations affiliated with a religious group must register separately. Upon receiving a submission, the Ministry of Justice issues a provisional approval and, within six months, a permanent approval or rejection. Unless the ministry specifically rejects the application, the group is considered approved and registered after six months even if the ministry has not issued a final determination. Applications from international headquarters of religious organizations must be approved by the Presidency after submission through the justice ministry. The law requires officially recognized religious groups to operate as nonprofits and respect the general public order. It also permits religious groups to establish places of worship and train clergy. The law prescribes penalties of up to two years' imprisonment, a fine of 200,000 Congolese francs (\$99), or both for groups that are not properly registered but receive gifts and donations on behalf of a church or other religious organization.

By law, eight religious groups that meet certain characteristics with regard to their status and competence in electoral matters (i.e., acting as civil society organizations) are charged with nominating the head of CENI. These groups include the Catholic Church, Protestant groups, the Muslim community, the Salvation Army, the Independent Church of Congo, the Kimbanguists, the Revival Church, and the Independent Orthodox Church.

The constitution permits public schools to work with religious authorities to provide religious education to students in accordance with students' religious

beliefs if parents request it. Government-funded public schools administered by religious institutions may provide religious instruction. Government-owned schools may not mandate religious instruction but may offer religion as a subject.

The law also prohibits insulting the head of state, the army, or government institutions and authorities, malicious and public slander, hate speech or speech to incite violence, and language presumed to threaten national security.

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

Government Practices

In April, CENI President Denis Kadima attended the International Kimbanguist Church's 101st anniversary celebration at its headquarters in Nkamba. Local press reported that Papa Zako, the spiritual chief of the church, gave a speech highlighting the collaboration between CENI and the church. In August, the provincial Minister of Culture, Arts, and Intercommunal Relations in Haut-Katanga Province, Immaculee Bagabe, attended the groundbreaking ceremony for a new Church of Jesus Christ house of worship in Lubumbashi.

The Ministry of Justice did not issue any final registration permits for religious groups; it has not done so since 2014. The government, however, continued its practice of permitting groups that had presumably filed registration permit requests to operate, and these domestic religious groups reported they continued to do so unhindered. Foreign-based religious groups stated they operated without restriction after applying for legal status. Under existing law, which remained under review, nonprofit organizations could operate as legal entities by default if a government ministry ruled favorably on their application and the government did not object to their application for status. According to registration statistics for 2015, the latest year for which the Ministry of Justice had statistics, there were 14,568 legally registered nonprofit organizations, 11,119 legal religious nonprofit organizations, and 1,073 foreign nonprofit organizations in the country.

The government continued to rely on religious organizations to provide public services such as education and health care throughout the country. According to the Ministry of Education, approximately 72 percent of primary school students and 65 percent of secondary school students attended government-funded public schools administered by religious organizations. The government paid teacher salaries at some schools run by religious groups, depending on the needs of the schools and whether they were registered as schools eligible to receive government funding. Most schools were run by the Catholic Church.

Muslim community leaders stated that government relations were generally good, but the government did not afford them some of the same privileges as larger religious groups. The government continued to deny Muslims the opportunity to provide chaplains in the military, police force, and hospitals, despite a complaint filed in 2015 with the then President and his cabinet. Catholic, Protestant, and Kimbanguist chaplains served in the police force and armed forces.

Actions of Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

ISIS-DRC/ADF continued to be active in the country. The group reportedly attacked civilians indiscriminately, regardless of religion, although most victims were Christian, reflecting their status as the majority religious group. Both local Christian and Muslim leaders, with vocal support from the government, again condemned ISIS-DRC/ADF's attacks on civilians. According to a May 2021 report by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Kivu Security Tracker, the aim of ISIS-DRC/ADF's killings was to discredit and put pressure on government authorities, to divide the government forces pursuing them, and to divide society as a whole. In its June report, the United Nations Group of Experts noted that ISIS-DRC/ADF continued to extend its area of operations in southern Ituri Province, particularly in the territories of Mambasa and Irumu.

In September, ISIS-DRC/ADF attacked Kathiri village (North Kivu), killing two civilians. The assailants also vandalized a local Catholic church, cutting off the

head of a statue of Jesus Christ and stealing and destroying the robes used during masses.

In March, authorities began the trial of a group of 16 ISIS-DRC/ADF members for killing two local imams, Sheikh Ali Amini and Djamali Moussa, in Beni, North Kivu, in May 2021. The group stated they targeted the imams for their refusing to facilitate the recruitment of children to ISIS-DRC/ADF. The defendants also said that the killings of the two imams had been a direct order from the head of ISIS-DRC/ADF, Musa Seka Baluku, who has been classified by the United States as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist since March 2021. Sheikh Ali Amini, a local Muslim leader, was a strong critic of Islamic militancy in the region and was known for his regular alerts to the community on ISIS-DRC/ADF movements in the region. As of December, the trial remained pending.

According to NGO International Christian Concern, ISIS-DRC/ADF forces raided the Catholic hospital in Maboya village on October 19, killed six patients and a Catholic nun staff member, stole drugs and medical equipment, and set the hospital on fire. Local residents told the NGO that several individuals from shops and houses close to the hospital, including two nuns, were reported missing after the attack, probably kidnapped by the attackers. The NGO said ISIS-DRC/ADF had increased attacks on villages and towns in North Kivu and Ituri Provinces since early October, when 20 Christians were reportedly killed in the town of Kainama, North Kivu.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In August, Radio Okapi reported one instance of vandalism and one of arson targeting Catholic churches in the city of Mbuji-Mayi (capital of Kasai Oriental Province). Police later opened an investigation, but as of December they had not identified the perpetrators. Both Prime Minister Sama Lukonde and the mayor of Mbuji-Mayi condemned the acts and on August 8, the Archbishop of Mbuji-Mayi excommunicated the unknown perpetrators.

The Jehovah's Witnesses *Religious Freedom Report* for 2022 stated that there were several attacks on members in the interior provinces, areas described as less tolerant of Jehovah's Witnesses than Kinshasa, according to members. On February 12 in Kwilu Province, a member of Jehovah's Witnesses was beaten to death by family members who accused him of using sorcery after his niece was struck and killed by lightning. In South Kivu Province on March 30, another member was physically assaulted for not taking part in a Kimbilikiti initiation ceremony. Kimbilikiti is an adulthood initiation ceremony for males of the Lega ethnic group. The Jehovah's Witnesses report also stated that some students who were members of the religious group had been expelled from public schools run by other religious confessions for refusing to participate in religious activities such as Catholic Mass, and that school authorities had fired or suspended some teachers who were members for not participating in religious activities or tithing at those schools. According to the report, most of those cases were under appeal.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers discussed a range of religious freedom issues, including government relations with religious organizations, with officials from the Ministries of Human Rights, Justice, Defense, and Interior. Embassy officials also regularly urged the government, security force leaders, and community and political leaders to refrain from violence and inflammatory rhetoric and to respect the rights of civil society, including of religious groups, to assemble and express themselves freely.

Throughout the year, embassy and Washington-based officials engaged members of the eight primary religious confessions and human rights organizations, especially in the eastern, conflict-affected provinces. In meetings with members and representatives of both the largest denominations and smaller faith communities, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim community leaders, U.S. officials discussed religious groups' ability to operate within the country, their relationship with the government and other religious organizations, and their freedom to practice their religion as they saw fit.