

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2022 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.

In August, the government suspended the activities nationwide of the Christian Ministry of Spiritual Combat Church because of what it said were tensions arising from infighting among church leaders. In October, the government ended COVID-19 restrictions that had required all participants attending religious services to observe social distancing and wear masks.

On October 2, the Catholic Church issued a statement of concern about growing insecurity in major cities, citing the assault of a bishop in Brazzaville. The Council of Churches of Congo and the High Islamic Council, the largest bodies representing religious organizations in the country, continued to organize educational training sessions on interreligious cooperation.

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom and tolerance in engagements with government leaders at the national, regional, and local levels. Issues raised included interfaith relations and equal participation in society by all citizens, regardless of religious background. Embassy representatives met with Catholic Church leaders to discuss the state of religious tolerance and interreligious cooperation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.5 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2012 census, the most recent, 55 percent of the native-born population are Catholic, 32 percent Protestant (of whom approximately 33

percent belong to evangelical Christian churches), and 2 percent Muslim. A survey by the Ministry of Economy, Planning, Territorial Management, and Integration, also from 2012, estimates that 55 percent of the native-born population are Protestant (of whom approximately 33 percent belong to evangelical Christian churches), 32 percent Roman Catholic, and 2 percent Muslim, while another 9 percent belong to the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu (Kimbanguist), the Celestial Church of Christ, the Salvation Army, Tenrikyo, Jehovah's Witnesses, or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ). The survey estimates 2 percent of the population are 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 *kindoki*. There is a very small Jewish community, primarily in Pointe Noire.

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 of 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 58,530 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

According to sources, high-ranking church officials, such as bishops, often received payments in the form of gifts from the government.

On August 20, the government suspended the activities nationwide of the Christian Ministry of Spiritual Combat Church due to what the government said

were concerns about tensions related to infighting among church leadership. Members reportedly continued to worship in private homes as the entrance to the main facility was inaccessible. The church's activities remained suspended at year's end.

Until mid-October, due to COVID-19 public health regulations, the government required that all participants in religious services respect social distancing measures and wear masks. On October 14, the government ended the state of health emergency and removed all restrictions related to COVID-19.

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

In October, the Ministry of Health and Population partnered with the Church of Jesus Christ to conduct training for midwives and physicians on techniques to prevent massive hemorrhages in women during labor and delivery.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On October 2, the Catholic Church issued a statement expressing concern about growing insecurity in major cities, citing the case of a bishop whom unknown persons assaulted in Brazzaville.

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, continued to organize multiple discussion sessions on interreligious cooperation.

On September 17, the Ecumenical Council of Churches of Congo held a joint mass celebration as a "Day of Meditation and Prayer for Leaders" in the Brazzaville suburb of Vouela.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

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

Embassy representatives encouraged efforts to increase dialogue and communication at the local, regional, and national levels between religious leaders and the Ministries of Interior, Justice, and Human Rights and Social and Humanitarian Affairs as well as local mayors and prefects. Embassy officials met separately with Catholic leaders to discuss the state of religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation. In September, the embassy financed the participation of a female pastor from the Evangelical Church of Congo in a three-week program in the United States focusing on "Women in Leadership, Promoting Peace and Security."