

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. embassy representatives met with religious group leaders and discussed human rights concerns with the government, including religious freedom. The United States suspended its diplomatic presence in the country in December.

Section I. Religious Demography

The population is 4.5 million, according to a 2011 World Bank estimate. According to the 2003 census, the population is 51 percent Protestant, 29 percent Roman Catholic, and 15 percent Muslim. Others incorporate aspects of indigenous beliefs into Christian and Islamic practice.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution also prohibits religious intolerance, as defined by the courts.

By law, religious groups, except for indigenous religious groups, must register with the Ministry of Territorial Administration. To register, religious groups must prove they have a minimum of 1,000 members and leaders whose religious education the government deems adequate.

The law permits the ministry to decline to register any religious group it deems offensive to public morale or likely to disturb social peace and to suspend the operation of registered religious groups if it finds their activities subversive.

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Registration is free and confers official recognition and certain limited benefits, such as customs duty exemption for importing vehicles or equipment.

The government grants religious groups one day of their choosing each week to make free broadcasts on the official radio station. Outside this regular time, religious groups must pay fees for broadcast time, as must nonreligious organizations.

The government does not explicitly prohibit religious instruction in public schools, but it is not part of the public school curriculum.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Monday after Pentecost Day, All Saints Day, and Christmas. The government does not observe Islamic holy days; however, the government allows Muslims to take leave from work on Islamic holy days.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. However, the government imposed restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups.

Muslims continued to face discrimination in access to government services when low-level bureaucrats reportedly created informal barriers. The constitutional provision prohibiting religious intolerance was widely perceived as designed to protect Muslims; however, implementing legislation did not support the provision.

Strict legal requirements restricted registration of new religious groups, although the Ministry of Territorial Administration did not reject any applications from new religious groups during the year. The ministry showed some flexibility on the minimum number of members and the level of a religious leader's education. For example, if a religious group with an established presence in another country sought registration, the ministry did not systematically require a minimum number of 1,000 members before authorizing its activities. Additionally the ministry accepted most religious leaders without the mandated education level if there were a sufficient number of followers.

Government officials attended Islamic holy day commemorations.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Muslims continued to face consistent social discrimination and, in many cases, were presumed to be sympathetic to rebel groups which were predominantly Muslim. Muslim-owned shops were frequently vandalized and, in some cases, vigilantes subjected Muslims to harassment, beating, and detention.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives discussed broad human rights concerns with the government. Embassy staff also met with the leaders of religious groups. In December the U.S. government suspended embassy operations due to security concerns.