

ANGOLA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom, but in practice the government restricted religious freedom. Leaders of the relatively small Muslim community reported greater levels of government harassment than in past years, mostly in the form of police closing or demolishing “illegal” mosques. The government stated these mosques had never received the requisite government permission to open in the first place. In November the government denied applications for legal recognition to 194 different religious organizations. The government has not granted legal recognition to any religious group since 2004.

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

U.S. embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with the government and encouraged the government to permit Muslims and members of other minority religious groups to worship freely. The embassy also expressed concern about the high threshold required for religious groups to receive official recognition and that the government had not recognized any new religious groups in nearly 10 years. The embassy maintained open and regular contact with various religious groups, including some the government does not legally recognize.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 18.6 million (July 2013 estimate). The majority of the population is Christian and the government estimates that 50 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. The National Institute for Statistics estimates that 33 percent of the population is Protestant (including Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, Congregationalists, and Assemblies of God); 9 percent is atheist, and 8 percent belongs to other religions. A small portion of the rural population practices animism or indigenous religious beliefs. There is a small Muslim community, unofficially estimated at 80,000 to 90,000, most of whom are migrants from West Africa or of Lebanese origin. Some Muslim sources put this figure at closer to 800,000.

There are approximately 350 Jews, primarily Israelis.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom but restrict the legal status of smaller religious groups. The constitution defines the country as a secular state, separating religion and state. The state recognizes and respects the right of different religious groups to organize and carry out their activities if they abide by the constitution and laws. The constitution also provides for freedom of conscience, religion, and worship, and provides the right to be a conscientious objector.

Religious groups must petition for legal status with the justice and culture ministries. Legal status gives religious groups the right to act as juridical persons in the court system, secures their standing as officially registered religious groups, and allows them to construct schools and places of worship. By law a religious group must have over 100,000 members and be present in 12 of the 18 provinces to gain legal status. Religious leaders must provide information on the group's doctrine or philosophy, organizational structure, and physical location.

Government Practices

The government imposed restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups.

The high membership threshold for religious groups to acquire legal status restricted registration. The government continued to recognize 83 registered religious groups, but did not register any new groups. The government last registered a new group in 2004 before the current law on religion came into effect. The groups recognized before the 2004 law were not required to meet the 100,000-member threshold. More than 1,000 organizations have applied unsuccessfully for legal recognition since 1991. The government has not granted legal status to any Muslim groups. Over 2,000 organizations reportedly continued to operate without legal status. The government generally permitted these organizations to exist, function, and grow without legal recognition. In November, however, the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights announced it had dismissed the applications for recognition from 194 different religious organizations for failing to comply with the legal requirements of registration. It did not provide further detail about the nature of the requirements that the organizations had failed to meet. The large majority of these organizations were Christian churches of various denominations,

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but also included the Islamic Community of Angola (CISA), one of the leading Muslim organizations.

In May the minister of culture stated that President dos Santos had created an inter-ministerial commission to look into the proliferation of what the minister called “sects” (referring to religious groups outside of the Christian groups traditionally present in the country) and their links to illegal immigrants. The government often associated Muslims with illegal immigration in the press and in official communications with the diplomatic corps. In September the government organized a workshop in Luanda to discuss concerns about the reported proliferation of these nontraditional religious groups and their beliefs. One of the workshop’s primary objectives was to evaluate the relationship of these groups to illegal immigration.

Government agencies, religious groups, and civil society organizations continued campaigns against indigenous religious practices involving shamans, animal sacrifices, or “witchcraft.” The stated goal of these campaigns was to discourage abusive practices that included willful neglect or physical abuse, particularly of women, children, and the elderly. It was unclear whether the campaigns also intended to discourage indigenous religious practices more generally. According to the National Institute for Religious Affairs, cases of abusive practices continued to decrease in number due to the campaigns and government directives.

Although government officials asserted the government protected religious groups without legal status and did not have a policy to close mosques or other Islamic facilities, leaders of the Muslim community reported greater levels of government harassment than in past years, mostly in the form of police closing or demolishing “illegal” mosques. In September the leader of CISA stated that the government had closed or destroyed at least nine mosques throughout the country during the year. He said that when members of the Muslim community asked for an explanation the authorities cited “superior orders” and sometimes simply flashed a piece of paper. He stated the authorities never allowed community leaders to keep a copy of the orders or, in most cases, even read them.

Luanda police destroyed a mosque in the Zango neighborhood of Luanda in October. According to official government statements, the local Islamic community had illegally acquired the land on which they had built the mosque. According to CISA, the Islamic community legally acquired the land in 2008, began construction in 2010, and finished the mosque during the year. Police first

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informed the mosque leaders of the illegality of the mosque on September 26 and arrived to destroy it on October 3.

Muslim group leaders stated Muslims could not practice Islam freely because the government did not recognize Islam and selectively intervened to close mosques, schools, and community centers. The leader of CISA said the government neither granted nor denied requests for permission to build mosques. He stated this indecision was not due to bureaucracy, but a purposeful attempt to keep Muslim communities in a state of limbo where they were unable to construct new mosques without fear that they would be demolished. The government stated it had no specific policy aimed at demolishing or closing mosques.

In January the government suspended the license of the Universal Church of the Reign of God for 60 days because of a stampede during the church's New Year's Eve gathering that killed 16 people and injured 120. Officials estimated the church allowed more than 200,000 followers to attend the service in a stadium with an occupancy capacity of only 50,000. Authorities permitted the church to resume services at the end of March. In October local authorities closed a church in Kuando Kubango Province. The government stated the unlicensed church was operating out of people's homes and illicitly collecting or laundering money.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

According to reports in several national media outlets, some members of civil society groups criticized the Catholic Church for having a close connection to the ruling party. The criticism focused on public support by prominent Catholic leaders for the ruling People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola – Labor Party (MPLA) and the alleged preferential treatment that the MPLA gave the church in return.

In response to questions from the press, representatives of longer-established churches spoke critically of smaller, newer religious groups, such as the many small "family churches" opened in recent years, often with no more than a dozen members. These representatives accused founders of the small churches of profit seeking. Critics stated that leaders of some family churches exploited the poorest segment of the population and demanded thousands or tens of thousands of kwanzas (tens or hundreds of dollars) in tithes in exchange for promises of long

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life, prosperity, or miracles. Critics also maintained some religious groups created their own nongovernmental organizations with proceeds directed to pastors instead of helping the poor.

On October 27, a group calling itself the “Prophetic Church of Noah’s Ark” vandalized the Catholic Shrine of Our Lady of Muxima, a historic landmark and famous pilgrimage site in central Angola. The Noah’s Ark group allegedly attacked the shrine because members felt it represented an illegitimate form of religious idolatry. Police reportedly detained the alleged perpetrators and stated they planned to prosecute.

Christian religious and other social leaders occasionally criticized Islam in meetings or to the press. In August the leader of a Christian church coalition stated the Islamic faith was foreign to Angolan culture and that Muslim immigrants who claimed to be coming to the country to pursue financial opportunities were actually coming to “implant their religion and smother our Christian matrix.”

The privately owned and the government press frequently criticized immigrants from the Democratic Republic of Congo for importing nontraditional, syncretic faiths and accused them of abuse and witchcraft.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives discussed religious freedom with government officials and encouraged the government to allow Muslims to worship freely and build mosques. Embassy staff also discussed with civil society and government officials concerns that these individuals expressed about traditional beliefs and customs potentially leading to harmful practices, including willful neglect or physical abuse. Embassy representatives encouraged the government to respect its citizens’ religious beliefs while discouraging indigenous religious groups from continuing the practice of blaming vulnerable citizens (particularly women, children, and the elderly) for social or economic problems.

The embassy maintained open and regular contact with many religious groups, including some not legally recognized by the government. In private conversations and meetings, embassy staff encouraged representatives of Muslim and Christian groups to interact more frequently and seek to support each other through interfaith dialogue.