

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The new constitution, adopted by referendum on October 25 and promulgated on November 6, prohibits religious discrimination, provides for freedom of religion, bans the use of religion for political ends, and stipulates impositions on freedom of conscience stemming from “religious fanaticism” shall be punishable by law. Police disrupted three Catholic Church masses on the day of the constitutional referendum. In May the government banned people from wearing full-face Islamic veils in public places.

Authorities arrested several youths for attempted vandalism against a mosque in the Brazzaville neighborhood of Poto Poto and for making threats against Islam. Following renewed violence in the Central African Republic (CAR) and the internal migration of existing CAR refugees from camps in the north of the country to the two largest urban centers, some people stated the potential for religious tensions continued to be a concern. Catholic and Muslim leaders, however, said they had not received any reports of religiously motivated incidents or actions directed against the Islamic community.

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom and tolerance in interactions with leaders in the government. Embassy officers also spoke with civil society leaders and several religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.7 million (July 2015 estimate). A 2012 survey by the Ministry of Economy, Planning, Territorial Management, and Integration estimates 55 percent of the native-born population is Protestant (of which approximately 33 percent belongs to evangelical churches), 32 percent Roman Catholic, and 2 percent Muslim. Another 9 percent belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu (Kimbanguist), Salvation Army, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). An estimated 2 percent of the population is atheist. A significant portion of the population combines traditional beliefs and practices with Christianity or other religious beliefs.

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Many residents not included in government statistics are foreign workers from predominantly Muslim countries. Over the past few years, there has also been an influx of Muslim refugees, particularly from the CAR. According to the president of the High Islamic Council of the Congo (CSIC), there are an estimated 800,000 Muslims, of whom 15 percent are citizens. Counting the immigrant community, the total Muslim population may be closer to 15 percent of the total population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The new constitution, adopted by referendum on October 25 and promulgated on November 6, contains the same provisions as the previous constitution and provides for freedom of belief, prohibits religious discrimination, and makes forced impositions on conscience based on “religious fanaticism,” such as forced conversion, punishable by law. The new constitution continues to ban the use of religion for political ends and political parties affiliated with a particular religious group.

All organizations, including religious groups, must register with and be approved by the minister of the interior. Religious group applicants must present a certification of qualifications to operate a religious establishment; a title or lease to the land; the exact address where the organization will be located; bylaws; and a document that clarifies the mission and objectives of the organization. Once registered, groups do not need to reregister when expanding their organizations. Penalties for failure to register include fines and potential confiscation of goods, invalidation of contracts, and deportation of foreign group members.

The country is a secular state and public schools do not teach religion, but private religious schools may do so. The constitution protects the right to establish private schools.

Government Practices

According to media reports and local human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), police prevented three Catholic masses from taking place in Pointe-Noire on October 25, the same day as the national referendum to change the constitution. Police told worshippers they could not “hold a rally” on the day of voting. A representative of the local Catholic Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission

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confirmed it had not received a directive from any governmental authority banning worship services on that day.

In May the government, with the full endorsement of the CSIC, banned people from wearing the full-face Islamic veil – including the *niqab* and the burka – in public places. According to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and international media, the government, again with the full endorsement of the CSIC, also banned Muslims from foreign countries from spending the night in mosques, a measure which rendered hundreds of Muslim CAR refugees without shelter. The government, in a joint announcement with the CSIC, stated both measures were designed to provide greater security against the threat of terrorist acts committed by extremists. According to the president of the CSIC, the government required it to notify the government when the CSIC knew of Muslims traveling out of country to participate in religious education or for activities sponsored by CSIC. The CSIC stated it had no objections to providing this information to the government, and said it viewed it as a necessary step to ensure security against the threat of terrorism.

The government legally registered dozens of churches during the year, according to information published in the government's Official Journal.

The government granted Christians and Muslims access to public facilities for special religious events. For example, on October 11, the Mormons held a semi-annual joint congregation meeting at the parliament building.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Early in the year, authorities arrested several youth for attempted vandalism against a mosque in the Brazzaville neighborhood of Poto Poto and for making threats against Islam.

According to media reports and NGOs, the general population, including practicing Muslims, broadly supported the ban on full Islamic face veils.

There were unconfirmed reports private citizens had expressed concerns about the potential for rising tensions because of the rapid growth of the Muslim population, especially in Pointe-Noire, the country's second largest city and economic center. Muslim and Catholic leaders stated, however, they had not received any reports of religiously motivated incidents or actions directed against the Islamic community.

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The Ecumenical Council, representing the Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist Churches, met at least biweekly. The Revivalist Council, representing evangelical Protestant churches, and the Islamic Council each met at least twice during the year. The stated goal of these meetings was to promote mutual understanding and tolerance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy promoted religious freedom and tolerance in interactions with the government. The embassy also met with civil society and religious groups. In these meetings, embassy officers discussed issues related to the veil ban, the constitutional referendum, and the presence of CAR refugees. In July, September, and October embassy officials met separately with Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim leaders to discuss the state of religious tolerance and cooperation, and to reaffirm the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom.