

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and equal protection under the law regardless of religion. It prohibits all forms of religious intolerance and “religious fundamentalism.” The law also requires the head of state to take an oath of office that includes a promise to fulfill the duties of the office without any consideration of religion. The government continued to exercise limited or no control or influence in most of the country. Police and the gendarmerie (military police) continued to fail to stop or punish abuses committed by armed groups, such as killings, physical abuse, and gender-based violence, including those based on religious affiliation, according to human rights organizations. In February the government and 14 of the country’s armed groups signed a peace agreement that included commitments to safeguard places of worship from violent attacks. In June the Special Criminal Court (SCC), established in 2018 to investigate serious human rights violations and alleged war crimes, announced that three of the 29 investigations launched since its inception could lead to trials. In July the government signed a tripartite agreement with Cameroon and the United Nations to facilitate voluntary repatriation of 250,000 predominantly Muslim citizens living as refugees in Cameroon. In September the International Criminal Court (ICC) began pretrial hearings in the case of an anti-Balaka commander and member of parliament accused of war crimes, as well as a second anti-Balaka leader.

The predominantly Christian anti-Balaka and the predominantly Muslim ex-Seleka militia forces continued to occupy territories in the western and northern parts of the country, respectively, and sectarian clashes between them and Christian and Muslim populations continued. Government forces usually did not intervene to curtail the violence. In May members of the armed group 3R attacked villages in the northwest of the country, killing more than 50 civilians allegedly in retaliation for the death of a member of a Muslim ethnic minority group. The government called on the leader of the armed group, appointed to a government advisor position following the signing of the February peace accord, to hand over those responsible. On May 16, the 3R handed over to the government three commanders accused of the killings. At year’s end, they were detained in Bangui and awaiting trial. Also in May, an unknown assailant killed a 77-year-old nun. The motive for the killing remained unclear.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) stated that religion continued to be a primary feature dividing the population. Many Muslim communities remained displaced in the western part of the country, where according to media reports, they were not allowed to practice their religion freely, either due to lack of protection from the government or because of intimidation by anti-Balaka units. During the year, the country's top religious leaders remained united in their view that the violence in the country caused by the armed groups was based primarily on the desire to control territory for their economic gain. In May at the start of Ramadan, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, President of the Islamic Community in the country, called for the strengthening of social cohesion and peaceful coexistence of religious communities.

In meetings with President Faustin Touadera and other government officials, U.S. embassy representatives raised concerns about the government's failure to safeguard religious freedom and advocated the safe voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their home communities. They encouraged the government representatives to implement outreach activities aimed at religious communities and publicly condemn attacks on religious structures and against religious groups. Embassy officials regularly engaged with religious leaders to listen to their concerns and issues, including Roman Catholic Cardinal Dieudonne Nzapalainga and other Christian leaders, imams, and members of the Coordinating Committee for Central African Muslim Organizations. In March the Ambassador hosted a roundtable for religious leaders designed to bridge gaps, strengthen relationships, and encourage freedom of religious choice and practice.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.9 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the Pew Research Foundation, the population is 61 percent Protestant, 28 percent Catholic, and 9 percent Muslim. Other religious groups, including traditional religious groups and those having no religious beliefs, make up an estimated 2 percent of the population. The NGO Oxfam estimates the percentage of Muslims, most of whom are Sunni, at up to 15 percent. Some Christians and Muslims incorporate aspects of indigenous religions in their religious practices.

In the central and southern regions of the country, Catholicism and Protestant Christianity are the dominant religions, while Islam is predominant in the northeast. In Bangui the majority of inhabitants in the PK5 and PK3 neighborhoods are Muslim, while other neighborhoods in the capital are

predominantly Christian. The 2014 International Commission of Inquiry on the Central African Republic reported a significant percentage of Muslims had fled to neighboring countries; their return during the year remained a slow process.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion under conditions set by law and equal protection under the law regardless of religion. It prohibits all forms of religious intolerance and “religious fundamentalism” but does not define these terms. The law also requires the head of state to take an oath of office that includes a promise to fulfill the duties of the office without any consideration of religion.

Religious groups, except for indigenous religious groups, are required to register with the Ministry of the Interior, Public Security, and Territorial Administration. To register, religious groups must prove they have a minimum of 1,000 members and their leaders have adequate religious education, as judged by the ministry. Indigenous religious groups may receive benefits and exemptions offered to registered groups regardless of their size.

The law permits the denial of registration to any religious group deemed offensive to public morals or likely to disturb social peace. It allows the suspension of registered religious groups if their activities are judged subversive by legal entities. There are no fees for registration as a religious organization. Registration confers official recognition and benefits, such as exemptions from customs tariffs for vehicles or equipment imported into the country. There are no penalties prescribed for groups that do not register.

The law does not prohibit religious instruction in public or private schools, but religious instruction is not part of the public-school curriculum.

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

Government Practices

The government continued to exercise limited or no control or influence in most of the country. Police and the gendarmerie failed to stop or punish abuses committed by militias, including killings, physical abuse, religious- and gender-based

violence, according to human rights organizations. The United Nations Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) remained the only force capable of maintaining security in much of the country, but according to most observers it remained hampered in its ability to protect civilians due to limited resources and personnel, as well as poor infrastructure impeding access to rural communities.

Because religion, ethnicity, and politics are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as solely based on religious identity.

On February 6, the government and 14 of the country's armed groups signed the Political Accord for Peace and Reconciliation (APPR), which was brokered by the African Union (AU) and supported by the United Nations. Among other commitments, armed groups agreed to refrain from acts of violence directed at places of worship.

In June President Touadera launched the first of seven public consultations on the creation of a Truth, Justice, Reparations, and Reconciliation Commission in support of the peace agreement.

In September the ICC began pretrial hearings in the case of Alfred "Rambo" Yekatom, an anti-Balaka commander and member of parliament, and Patrice Edouard Ngaïssona, also a senior leader of the anti-Balaka. At year's end, both men were in ICC custody and stood accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including killings targeting Muslim civilians, deportation and torture of Muslims, and destruction of mosques. Victims and selected members of the public in the country viewed the proceedings streamed live from the ICC in The Hague.

The Ministry of Humanitarian Action and National Reconciliation continued public service announcements via nationwide radio stations, reaffirming the government's commitment to treat all citizens equally.

The government continued to observe Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as official but unpaid holidays, while Christian national holidays were paid holidays. President Touadera participated in an iftar with Muslim leaders at the Mosque of Lakouanga, in the 2nd District of Bangui, where he reiterated his previous year's request for tolerance and urged the participants to find ways to live together and to seek "national harmony." Imam Mahamat Said focused his remarks on the need for justice and mutual understanding.

In August the Ministry of Territorial Administration announced the closure of several places of worship in Bangui for failing to meet guidelines for recognition as legitimate religious organizations and for disruption of public order.

In June the Special Criminal Court (SCC), established in 2018 in Bangui to investigate serious human rights violations including genocide and alleged war crimes, some of which were related to religious identity, announced that three of the 29 investigations launched since its inception could lead to trials. The SCC did not release details of these cases, however, since investigations they deemed sensitive were still underway.

MINUSCA continued to support government-led local peace and reconciliation initiatives that aimed to improve relationships between Christians and Muslims. The efforts included public outreach and sensitization workshops. For example, in June local authorities and MINUSCA jointly established three local peace committees in the subprefectures of Gambo, Pombolo, and Ngandou. The committees of 13 leaders in each community were tasked with sensitizing their communities to the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement and promoting social cohesion, peaceful coexistence, and the nonviolent settlement of conflicts. Observers continued to state that these initiatives helped counter inflammatory rhetoric and dispel rumors, and public meetings held under the auspices of the initiative helped to reassure vulnerable communities of their safety.

In March, 13 Muslim families departed the IDP camp in Bangassou and resettled in their original villages.

In July the government signed a tripartite agreement with Cameroon and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of 250,000 citizens living as refugees in Cameroon. According to UNHCR, approximately 2,800 refugees, the majority Muslim, expressed a desire to return to their home country.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors

According to media and UN reports, armed groups, particularly the anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka, continued to control approximately 80 percent of the territory throughout the country and acted as de facto governments in the territory they controlled. The government exercised control in the capital and its immediate surroundings. According to the United Nations and human rights organizations, the dire humanitarian and human rights situation continued to persist and even

worsened in the northeast, where clashes continued among various armed groups drawn primarily along ethnic lines.

In September clashes between two predominantly Muslim armed groups from different ethnic groups resulted in the deaths of more than 50 combatants and civilians and affected more than 20,000 IDPs in the town of Birao. Conflicts between the Popular Front for the Renaissance of the Central African Republic and the Movement of Central African Freedom Fighters for Justice reportedly led to the segregation of their respective ethnic groups in IDP camps in Birao. Observers said the government did not intervene to curtail the violence.

In May members of the armed group 3R attacked villages in the northwest of the country, killing more than 50 civilians allegedly in retaliation for the death of a member of a Muslim ethnic minority group. The government called on the leader of the armed group, appointed to a government advisor position following the signing of the February peace accord, to hand over those responsible. On May 16, the 3R handed over to the government three commanders accused of the killings. At year's end, they were detained in Bangui and awaiting trial.

Also in May, an unknown assailant killed a 77-year-old nun. The motive for the killing remained unclear.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

NGOs reported religion continued to be a primary feature dividing the population. Many Muslim communities remained displaced in the western part of the country, where according to media reports, they were not allowed to practice their religion freely.

Religious leaders generally avoided characterizing the ongoing conflicts as religiously based. Instead, they identified political and economic power struggles and foreign influence as the root causes. In May Bishop Nestor Nongo-Aziagbia, president of the country's Catholic Bishops' Conference, said the country was in the grips of a political, not a religious, conflict and pointed to economic exploitation as a significant driver of the conflict. He said that Christians and Muslims were working together for peace in a number of distressed regions of the country. In May at the start of Ramadan, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, president of the Islamic Community in the Central African Republic, called for the strengthening of social cohesion and peaceful coexistence of religious communities.

The Platform for Religious Confessions in Central Africa (PCRC) continued its efforts to promote interfaith dialogue throughout the country. In January its Muslim founder and representative, Imam Omar Kobine, reaffirmed the role of the PCRC in working to reduce violence and promote reconciliation in the country.

During the year, Radio Sewa FM, a community radio station dedicated to promoting interfaith dialogue, broadcast programs aimed at both Muslim and Christian communities in PK5 and PK3. Based in PK5, the station was founded by a local NGO in 2017 with the goal of promoting interfaith dialogue.

Muslims continued to report social discrimination and marginalization, including difficulties accessing identification documents, and security concerns, which hampered their inability to move freely throughout the country.

According to religious leaders, Muslims throughout the country faced challenges within their communities because of ethnic differences, such as Muslims of Arab and Peulh (Fulani) ethnicity. For example, observers said some Muslims of Arab descent considered themselves superior to Muslims of other ethnicities and that Muslims who converted from Christianity were frequently ostracized among the Muslim population. The sources also stated these converts were often prevented from living in and interacting with some Muslim communities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings with President Touadera and other government officials, embassy representatives raised concerns about religious freedom and the safe voluntary return of refugees and IDPs to their home communities. They encouraged the government representatives to implement outreach activities directed at religious communities and publicly condemn attacks on religious structures and against religious groups. They also called on the government to provide security for all citizens, regardless of faith.

Embassy officials regularly engaged with religious leaders, including Cardinal Nzapalainga, other Christian leaders, imams, and representatives of the Coordinating Committee for Central African Muslim Organizations, on issues related to religious freedom and reconciliation and explored opportunities to broaden their access and dialogue with elected officials.

The embassy continued to fund a consortium formed to build up the capacity of the Platform of Religious Confessions to bolster its role in promoting social cohesion, including reconciliation between religious communities.

In March the Ambassador hosted a roundtable for Christian and Muslim leaders at her residence. She encouraged open dialogue and explored solutions to bridge gaps, strengthen relationships, and encourage freedom of religious choice and practice.

In March and August embassy officials visited IDP camps in Bangassou and Bambari, where they discussed ways to improve security and freedom to ensure peaceful practice of religion.

In August embassy officials recognized the end of Ramadan with the presentation of foodstuffs to three Muslim communities. Participants in the ceremonies included imams, Muslim female community leaders, and more than 150 observers. Embassy officials emphasized a message of tolerance and acceptance of diversity, stressing the need for peace and asking guests to continue the spirit of coexistence that marked the day.

The embassy sponsored the participation of a Muslim community activist from the PK5 neighborhood in an exchange program in the United States focusing on women in peace and security.