

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religious belief. Relations between the government and religious organizations markedly improved in 2019, following the inauguration of President Felix Tshisekedi in January, according to media reports. In contrast to the previous year, there were no reports of government repression or intimidation of religious organizations engaged in political activities.

Antigovernment militia members targeted churches and church property in the North Kivu and Ituri Provinces, where armed groups remain active. Local media reported that on June 5, armed militia members kidnapped Father Luc Adelar Alecho, a Catholic priest in Ituri Province. The militants allegedly reproached him for his homilies urging his congregation to reject armed groups before letting him go. Local leaders in the northern part of the country expressed concern over the presence of the nomadic Muslim Mbororo cattle herder communities. Some leaders described their migration as an “Islamic invasion.” Clashes between Mbororo and local populations resulted in several deaths in Upper and Lower Uele Provinces throughout the year. In addition to religious differences, observers stated there were also economic and political concerns linked to the conflict, and for that reason it was difficult to categorize these acts as solely based on religious belief.

U.S. embassy officers met with officials in the Ministries of Justice, Human Rights, and Interior to discuss religious freedom issues, including government relations with religious organizations. Embassy officials also met regularly with religious leaders and human rights organizations and discussed relations with the government, their concerns about abuses of civil liberties, and the safety of religious leaders in the country’s conflict-affected areas.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 87.3 million (midyear 2019 estimate). The Pew Research Center estimates 95.8 percent of the population is Christian, 1.5 percent Muslim, and 1.8 percent report no religious affiliation (2010 estimate). Of Christians, 48.1 percent are Protestant, including evangelical Christians and the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon

Kimbangu (Kimbanguist), and 47.3 percent Catholic. Other Christian groups include the Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Greek Orthodox Church. There are small communities of Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, and followers of indigenous religious beliefs. Muslim leaders estimate their community to comprise approximately 5 percent of the population.

A significant portion of the population combines traditional beliefs and practices with Christianity or other religious beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and the right to worship subject to "compliance with the law, public order, public morality, and the rights of others." It stipulates the right to religious freedom may not be abrogated even when the government declares a state of emergency or siege.

The law regulates the establishment and operation of religious groups. According to law, the government may legally recognize, suspend recognition of, or dissolve religious groups. The government grants tax-exempt status to recognized religious groups. Nonprofit organizations, including foreign and domestic religious groups, must register with the government to obtain official recognition by submitting a copy of their bylaws and constitution. Religious groups must register only once for the group as a whole, but nonprofit organizations affiliated with a religious group must register separately. Upon receiving a submission, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) issues a provisional approval and, within six months, a permanent approval or rejection. Unless the MOJ specifically rejects the application, the group is considered approved and registered after six months even if the ministry has not issued a final determination. Applications from international headquarters of religious organizations must be approved by the presidency after submission through the MOJ. The law requires officially recognized religious groups to operate as nonprofits and respect the general public order. It also permits religious groups to establish places of worship and train clergy. The law prescribes penalties of up to two years' imprisonment, a fine of 200,000 Congolese francs (\$120), or both for groups that are not properly registered, but receive gifts and donations on behalf of a church or other religious organization.

The constitution permits public schools to work with religious authorities to provide religious education to students in accordance with students' religious beliefs if parents request it. Public schools with religious institution guardianship may provide religious instruction. Government-owned schools may not mandate religious instruction, but offer religion as a subject.

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

Government Practices

Following the inauguration of Felix Tshisekedi as president in January, relations between the government and religious communities improved, according to the media and religious leaders. Unlike the year prior, there were no reports of acts of violence or intimidation against Catholic Church officials by the government. In March the government freed several political prisoners from the Catholic Lay Community (CLC) who had been arrested in 2018 for leading protests, which nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and others had called an arbitrary action. Other CLC activists, including Leonnie Kandolo, who spent a year in hiding after organizing protests in support of elections in early January and February 2018, stated in January that their freedom of speech had returned with the inauguration of Tshisekedi.

The MOJ again did not issue any final registration permits for religious groups, and had not done so since 2014. An MOJ internal audit reportedly focused on fraudulent registration practices remained incomplete at year's end and was cited by some observers as an obstacle to the resumption of registration issuances. The government, however, continued its practice that groups presumed to have been approved were permitted to operate. Unregistered domestic religious groups reported they continued to operate unhindered. The MOJ previously estimated that more than 2,000 registration applications for both religious and nonreligious NGOs remained pending and that more than 3,500 associations with no legal authorization continued to operate. Foreign-based religious groups reported they operated without restriction after applying for legal status. Under existing law, which was under review, nonprofit organizations could operate as legal entities by default if a government ministry gave a favorable opinion of their application and the government did not object to their application for status. According to 2015 registration statistics, the latest year for which the MOJ had statistics, there were 14,568 legally registered nonprofit organizations, 11,119 legal religious nonprofit organizations, and 1,073 foreign nonprofit organizations. Religious nonprofits that were legally operating and registered included 404 Catholic, 93 Protestant, 54

Muslim, and 1,322 evangelical nonprofits, the latter including those belonging to the Kimbangu Church.

The government continued to rely on religious organizations to provide public services such as education and healthcare throughout the country. According to the Ministry of Education, approximately 72 percent of primary school students and 65 percent of secondary school students attended government-funded schools administered by religious organizations. The government paid teacher salaries at some schools run by religious groups depending on the needs of the schools and whether they were registered as schools eligible to receive government funding.

Muslim community leaders again said the government did not afford them some of the same privileges as larger religious groups. The government continued to deny Muslims the opportunity to provide chaplains for Muslims in the military, police force, and hospitals, despite a complaint filed in 2015 with the then-president and his cabinet.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Illegal armed groups operating in the provinces of North Kivu and Ituri in the eastern part of the country occasionally targeted church leaders. Local media reported that on June 5, armed militia members kidnapped Father Luc Adelar Alecho, a priest and the administrator of the Catholic parish of Marie Reine de Jiba, in Ituri Province's Welendu Ptisi Sector. The reports stated that the militants reproached him for his homilies urging his congregation to reject armed groups before letting him go.

Some religious leaders reported continued tensions between Christian and Muslim communities in the north. Local leaders expressed concerns that the nomadic Muslim Mbororo herder population was part of an "Islamic invasion" of the country. Sporadic violence between local communities and the Mbororo in Upper and Lower Uele Provinces throughout the year resulted in several deaths. In addition to religious differences, observers stated there were also economic and political concerns linked to the conflict and for that reason it was difficult to categorize these acts as solely based on religious belief.

In April ISIS claimed responsibility for attacks against a government military base that were carried out by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an armed group long-operating in North Kivu Province that proclaimed allegiance to ISIS in 2017 and was publicly recognized by ISIS as an affiliate in late 2018. In conjunction

with the April claim of responsibility, ISIS announced the establishment of a new *wilayat* (province), ISIS–Central Africa. According to civil society sources in the eastern part of the country, these statements highlighted ADF’s desire to promote a strict brand of Islam in the overwhelmingly Christian region of the Great Lakes. Local Christian and Muslim leaders, with vocal support from the government, condemned ADF’s actions.

Leaders of the Jehovah’s Witnesses reported generally positive relations with individuals from other religious groups but noted that 27 cases of assault on or suspected killings of Jehovah’s Witnesses dating from as early as 2015 continued to languish in the court system or were never sent to court for criminal prosecution after the arrests of suspects. They also reported five assaults during the year that they stated were due to their religious beliefs in rural areas of Kwilu, South Kivu, and Sankuru Provinces.

Muslim leaders said that Christian groups sometimes failed to include them in intercommunal dialogues.

During the year, the Anglican Church reported that it was attempting to leave the Church of Christ in Congo, (ECC) a union of more than 70 Protestant denominations, in order to have the ability to act more independently.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with official in the Ministries of Justice, Human Rights, and the Interior to discuss religious freedom issues, including government relations with religious organizations. Embassy officials also regularly urged the government, security force leaders, and community and political leaders to refrain from violence and respect the rights of civil society, including religious groups, to assemble and express themselves freely.

Throughout the year, embassy and Washington-based U.S. officials engaged with members of religious groups and human rights organizations. In meetings and discussions with members of the Muslim Association of Congo, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Apostolic nunciature, and Jewish Community of Chabad-Lubavitch of Central Africa, U.S. officials discussed religious groups’ ability to operate within the country, their relationship with the government and other religious organizations, and their freedom to worship and express their religion as they saw fit.