

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC 2018 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 control or influence in most of the country, and police and the gendarmerie (military police) failed to stop or punish abuses committed by militias, such as killings, physical abuse, and gender-based violence, including those based on religious affiliation, according to human rights organizations. 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. These clashes often included attacks on churches and mosques, and the deaths of religious adherents at those places of worship. The Muslim community stated there was continued discrimination by government officials on account of their religious beliefs or affiliation, including exclusion from public services, such as access to education and healthcare.

Armed groups, particularly the predominantly Christian anti-Balaka and predominantly Muslim ex-Seleka, continued to control significant swaths of the country and clashes continued throughout the year. In April and May a joint government and UN operation to disarm a militia group in Bangui’s predominantly Muslim PK5 neighborhood sparked renewed violence. On May 1, militia gunmen attacked and killed one priest, Father Toungoumale-Baba, 26 worshipers, and injured more than 100 civilians, in the Notre-Dame de Fatima Catholic Church in Bangui. The following day, anti-Balaka elements burned two mosques in Bangui. On November 15, a suspected ex-Seleka militia group set fire to the Catholic cathedral and an adjoining internally displaced person (IDP) camp in the city of Alindao, killing Bishop Blaise Mada and Reverend Delestin Ngouambango and more than 40 civilians.

On May 25, the Platform of Religious Confessions (PCRC) composed of Muslims, Catholics, and Protestants, published a memorandum on the continuing political crisis that started in 2012. The memorandum expressed concerns about the

persistence of violence and called for an end to the clashes among the religiously oriented factions.

In May the White House press secretary issued a statement condemning the attacks on the Notre-Dame de Fatima Church in Bangui and retaliatory attacks on Muslims in the weeks that followed. The press secretary called on the government to provide security for all citizens, regardless of faith. At the onset of the violence, embassy staff met with government representatives responsible for human rights and religious freedom and encouraged authorities to implement measures to stem the violence. They also served as intermediaries to help increase communication and trust between the religious leaders and the government, address claims of religious discrimination, and support reconciliation efforts. Embassy officials engaged the Christian and Muslim communities, including armed group representatives, to discourage further violence. There were similar meetings with religious leaders and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). These meetings explored possible solutions and offered assistance to aid the religious communities, promoted the return of IDPs that were dislocated because of religiously based violence, and highlighted the importance of religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.7 million (July 2018 estimate). Fifty percent of the population identifies as Christian, 35 percent as belonging to indigenous religions, and the remaining 15 percent as Muslim. Some Christians and Muslims incorporate aspects of indigenous religions in their religious practices.

In the central and southern regions of the country, Roman Catholicism and Islam are the dominant religions. In Bangui, there are two neighborhoods, PK5 and PK13, where the majority of the population is Muslim. Some human rights organizations reported a reduction in Bangui's Muslim population from 100,000 to 20,000, resulting from significant outbreaks of sectarian violence in recent years. 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.

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 fail to 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 control or influence in most of the country, and 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 National Multidimensional Stabilization Mission for Central Africa (MINUSCA) remained the only force capable of maintaining security in much of the country, but remained hampered in its ability to protect civilians due to limited resources and personnel.

According to religious leaders, government authorities continued to discriminate systematically against Muslims by denying them access to education and identity documents. In August the Ministry of Humanitarian Action and National Reconciliation launched public service announcements via nationwide radio stations, reaffirming the government’s commitment to treat all citizens equally.

Observers and Muslim leaders, however, stated Muslims continued to experience ongoing discrimination by government agencies and unequal access to public services. NGOs stated there was an increase in harassment and exclusion of Muslims from national decision-making processes.

In January the Bangui Criminal Court convicted former anti-Balaka Commander Rodrigue Ngaibona, known as General Andjilo, on charges of murder, criminal conspiracy, aggravated robbery, kidnapping, and illegal arms possession, and sentenced him to life in prison. He had been in pretrial detention since his capture by MINUSCA troops in 2015. According to media reports, Ngaibona could face additional charges from the Special Criminal Court (SCC), established to prosecute war crimes and serious human rights violations, on grounds of having orchestrated a massacre of Muslims in Bangui in 2013.

In November government officials transported Alfred “Rambo” Yekatom, an anti-Balaka commander and Member of Parliament accused of war crimes, including killings, deportation, and torture of Muslims, to The Hague and turned him over to the International Criminal Court for prosecution.

The government continued to observe Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as official but unpaid holidays. President Faustin Touadera hosted an iftar with Muslim leaders at the Presidential Palace. During the dinner, President Touadera asked for tolerance and acceptance among all religious faiths.

The SCC held its inaugural session in October. It launched several formal investigations. At year’s end the investigations continued and no cases had come to trial.

MINUSCA supported government-led local peace and reconciliation initiatives that aimed to improve relationships between Christians and Muslims. The efforts included public outreach and sensitization workshops. MINUSCA assisted the government in its efforts to promote reconciliation through the media. Observers stated that in April the initiative 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 June, following an educational workshop organized by the High Council of Communication, the national regulator, and MINUSCA, journalists from local media outlets worked to improve relationships between religious groups. They pledged to discontinue contributing to messages that incited hate based on religious

differences and to improve the quality of their reporting with sensitivity toward their religious listeners and readers.

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 significant swaths of territory throughout the country and acted as de facto governments in the territory they controlled.

According to the UN and human rights organizations, the humanitarian and human rights situation worsened in the southeast, where clashes continued among various armed groups.

On January 4, in Bangassou, a man identified as a Muslim stabbed Catholic priest Alain Blaise Bissialo. Church members stated they believed the attack was an attempt to thwart his activism and work towards Christian-Muslim reconciliation in Bangassou.

On February 7, three churches were burned and a pastor was killed in Bangui following the death of a gang leader at the hands of MINUSCA and the police.

On March 21, in the town of Seko, an unknown assailant shot and killed Catholic priest Joseph-Desire Angbabata. The incident occurred when he intervened to prevent an attack by members of the Christian community on Muslim refugees seeking shelter on church grounds.

In April, following an operation by MINUSCA and government forces to disarm an ex-Seleka militia group in the Muslim PK5 neighborhood, heavy clashes broke out during which MINUSCA troops battled armed militias and criminal gangs for several days. One UN peacekeeper and more than 20 civilians, mostly Muslim, died in the fighting. In the weeks following the clashes, violence spread outside of PK5 as both ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka militias carried out reprisal attacks, including against individuals on account of their perceived religious identity or affiliation.

Ex-Seleka gunmen from PK5 attacked the Catholic Notre-Dame de Fatima Church in Bangui on May 1, killing Catholic priest Toungoumale-Baba and 26 worshippers. More than 100 persons were injured when the attackers sprayed the church with bullets and detonated grenades, according to media and survivor reports. This attack was followed by revenge attacks by members of the Christian

community, including the lynching deaths of three Muslims and the burning of two mosques.

In mid-May unknown assailants killed three Muslim civilians in Bambari. Muslim civilians in the local community, backed by the Muslim-dominated Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC) militias, then attacked an IDP camp occupied by Christians and the gendarmerie located in the same Christian area. During the attack, one police officer was killed, two others injured, and the IDPs were left in what the UN described as “desperate humanitarian conditions.”

On June 29 suspected members of the UPC militia killed Father Firmin Gbagoua, Catholic Vicar-General of Bambari. According to the secretary general of the Central African Human Rights Observatory, he may have been targeted because the UPC believed he was giving preferential treatment to Christians by denouncing attacks inflicted by Muslims in the area. Following the killing, Catholic officials expressed concern for the safety of their clerics.

A MINUSCA report on human rights violations indicated the overall security situation in Haute-Kotto Prefecture remained volatile, with sporadic fighting between anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka groups, and civilians bearing the brunt of the fighting as they were often caught in crossfire or targeted in retaliatory attacks based on ethnic or religious affiliation. According to the report, as many as 30 civilians (including at least 12 women and two children) may have been killed and at least six injured during attacks along the Bria-Irabanda road and in Bria town and its vicinity from August 5 to September 10.

On November 15, UPC militia attacked the Catholic cathedral in Alindao and a neighboring IDP camp, which was completely destroyed. The militia set the cathedral on fire and two Catholic clerics, Bishop Blaise Mada and Father Celestin Ngoumbango, were killed along with more than 40 Christian civilians. Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Bangui Father Mathieu Bondobo told Vatican News that Bishop Mada had been receiving threats, indicating that the attack was premeditated. According to a Christian advocacy organization, the attack stemmed from perceptions that the clerics killed were showing preferential treatment towards Christians in IDP camps and sheltering anti-Balaka elements at the church. On December 4, the UPC attacked an IDP camp run by a local Catholic church in Ippy town. The attackers razed the camp, destroying temporary shelters and personal belongings.

The UN Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic reported in December that hate speech and incitement to ethnic and religious-based violence had reached unprecedented levels. The report cited a statement published by the League for the Defense of the Church following the June killing of Father Gbagoua, which called on “all Christians to join us and support the movement [the league] so that Muslims also feel endangered in the Central African Republic, especially in Bangui.” The panel also stated some anti-Balaka affiliated groups were carrying out targeted attacks against the local Muslim population.

UN peacekeepers stated local anti-Balaka soldiers and Christian community members subjected returning Muslims to harassment and abuse. Displaced Muslim minorities lived predominantly in peacekeeper-protected enclaves and the return to their homes proceeded very slowly, according to international organizations.

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.

Catholic Cardinal Dieudonne Nzapalainga cited the practice of Christian leaders sheltering Muslims and Muslim leaders sheltering Christians fleeing conflicts in their respective homesteads. He highlighted the central role ownership of land and mineral resources played in exacerbating tensions that led to interreligious violence. Muslim Imam Omar Kobine Layama echoed Nzapalaninga’s view and said the militias and criminal elements had instrumentalized religion to deflect from the true cause of the conflict. Both Christian and Muslim religious leaders rejected the idea that religion was the cause of the conflict.

In the predominantly Muslim Fulani community, there were complaints that Christian sponsors financed most local media outlets, and these reported negative comments directed towards Muslims. Since September 2015, there have been no Muslim-operated radio stations or Muslim-oriented programs on national radio stations.

Muslims reported social discrimination and marginalization, including their inability to move freely throughout the country or have equal access to schools, hospitals, or government, and most privately funded, services.

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, sources stated some Muslims of Arab descent considered themselves superior to Muslims of other ethnicities, and that Muslims who converted from Christianity were frequently treated as inferiors among the Muslim population. The sources also stated that these converts were often prevented from living in and interacting with some Muslim communities.

Before his death, Father Gbagoua said some Christians reported they felt marginalized by the MINUSCA peacekeeping forces and that, because a large number of MINUSCA forces were Muslims, they exhibited a bias towards their coreligionists.

On February 17, members of the Organization of Young Volunteers for Development (OJVD), a Christian organization, visited the Attik Mosque in Bangui, where they met and discussed peace and cohesion with the Muslim imam. Participants said this meeting signaled a significant step toward greater interreligious dialogue, especially following the recent outbreaks of violence in Bangui. Leading the OJVD delegation was its founding president, a former anti-Balaka chief.

On January 14, the secretary general of the Catholic Archdiocese of Bangui expressed concern over the increased number of attacks against churches and mosques as well as the killing of religious leaders. On a separate occasion, Cardinal Nzapalainga and Imam Layama jointly denounced the killing of religious leaders. In January the Central African Episcopal Conference, representing Catholic bishops in the country, made a public announcement via local media in which it emphasized the organization's condemnation of sectarian violence and encouragement of interreligious community peace across the country.

On June 12, Cardinal Nzapalainga called on the population of the primarily Christian community of Yakite District, close to PK5, and Muslim armed groups in PK5, to make peace.

On May 25, the PCRC organized a meeting with participants from various religious groups. They drafted a joint memorandum calling on the government to use the SCC to prosecute individuals who committed crimes against citizens on account of their religious affiliation.

During a closing Eid-al-Fitr ceremony on June 29, former national anti-Balaka spokesperson Emotion Namsio and former ex-Seleka leader General Abdel Kalhil (Christian and Muslim, respectively) called upon the audience of approximately 100 participants of Christians and Muslims to cease attacking each other because of their religious preferences. The ceremony was held in a mosque located in a Christian neighborhood in Bangui.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings with President Touadera, the presidential advisor for national reconciliation, and the minister of social affairs and reconciliation, embassy representatives raised concerns about religious freedom and the safe return of refugees and 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. Citing the attacks on a Catholic church in Bangui, which was followed by retaliatory attacks on Muslims, 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, leaders of the interdenominational faiths, imams, and the Coordinating Committee for Central African Muslim Organizations, on issues related to religious freedom and reconciliation and explored opportunities to broaden access and dialogue with elected officials.

The U.S. embassy continued to fund a consortium formed to build up the capacity of the PCRC to bolster its high-profile role in promoting social cohesion, including reconciliation between religious communities.

During the April and May upsurge in violence, embassy officials met regularly with representatives of the Christian and Muslim communities, including anti-Balaka and armed group representatives, to urge them to refrain from further violent action.

In mid-May embassy officials, who were the first foreign diplomats to enter Bangui's Muslim-majority PK5 District since the violent upsurge in April, called for peace and reconciliation.

In June the embassy hosted an iftar with 60 Muslim and Christian guests. Participants included officials from the government, members of the diplomatic corps, and private sector and NGO representatives. 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.

On July 7, embassy staff, other diplomatic representatives, and MINUSCA leadership visited the Muslim-majority district of PK5 in Bangui. They met with Muslim community leaders and discussed ways to improve security and freedom to ensure peaceful practice of Islam.