

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 2021 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 continued to improve, according to religious leaders and media reports, although some tensions emerged regarding the role of religious groups in naming an electoral commission president, including a high-profile incident of vandalism. Muslim community leaders again said the government did not afford them some of the same privileges as larger religious groups, such as having Muslim chaplains in the military, police, and hospitals.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-Democratic Republic of the Congo (ISIS-DRC), an armed group designated by the United States as a terrorist organization in March, continued to operate in the country. ISIS-DRC usually attacked civilians, hospitals and schools indiscriminately in North Kivu and Ituri Provinces, but on occasion targeted churches and Muslim leaders. While the violence targeted and affected all communities, most victims were Christian, reflecting their status as the religious majority. In May, unknown assailants killed two Muslim clerics in North Kivu who had frequently criticized ISIS-DRC. Both army and civil society observers blamed ISIS-DRC for a church bombing in June. Both Muslims and Christians spoke out against attacks by ISIS-DRC.

Local media on September 21 reported that armed men wearing police uniforms robbed a parish church in Bukavu, South Kivu Province, despite its proximity to a police sub-station, and assaulted the priests inside. In August, Radio France Internationale (RFI) reported multiple instances of vandalism targeting Catholic churches in southwestern Kasai Province and southeastern Haut-Katanga Province. A representative of the Jehovah's Witnesses said there have been several attacks on members of the religious group in the interior provinces, which he described as less tolerant of Jehovah's Witnesses than Kinshasa.

U.S. embassy officers met with Ministry of Human Rights, Justice, Defense, and Interior officials and discussed religious freedom issues, including government relations with religious organizations. Embassy officials also regularly urged the government, security forces leaders, and community and political leaders to refrain from violence and to respect the rights of civil society, including of religious groups, to assemble and express themselves freely. Throughout the year, embassy

and Washington-based officials engaged with religious groups. The Ambassador met with religious leaders frequently during visits to cities in the eastern provinces.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 105 million (midyear 2021). In 2010, the Pew Research Center estimated 95.8 percent of the population is Christian, 1.5 percent Muslim, and 1.8 percent report no religious affiliation. Of Christians, an estimated 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 Roman Catholic. There are approximately 60 Protestant denominations. Other Christian groups include 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 religions. Muslim leaders estimate their community makes up 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 are required to 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 issues a provisional approval and, within six months, a permanent approval or rejection. Unless the ministry 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 ministry. 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 (\$100), or both for groups that are not properly registered but receive gifts and donations on behalf of a church or other religious organization.

Under the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) organic law of 2006, the eight religious confessions (the Catholic Church, Protestant groups, the Islamic faith community, the Salvation Army, the Independent Church of Congo, the Kimbanguists, the Revival Church, and the Orthodox Church) meeting certain characteristics with regard to their status and competence in electoral matters (i.e., acting as civil society organizations) are charged with nominating the CENI head.

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. Government-funded public schools administered by religious-institutions may provide religious instruction. Government-owned schools may not mandate religious instruction, but may offer religion as a subject.

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

Government Practices

Vatican News and the Association for Catholic Information in Africa reported that on August 1, assailants believed to be progovernment and affiliated with the ruling party threw stones at the residence of Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, the Catholic Archbishop of Kinshasa, in the Archdiocese of Kinshasa's Lindonge Pastoral Center, and vandalized other property. The attack was widely believed by Church leaders to be connected to the Church's criticism of the reorganization of the country's CENI. The government made no statement regarding the vandalism nor took responsibility for its supporters' actions.

In compliance with the CENI organic law of 2006, the eight religious confessions met in October to nominate the new CENI head. The representatives of organizations representing mainline Protestant and Catholic Churches, the two

confessions to which a majority of religious adherents in the country belong, rejected the choice of the other six religious groups – the Islamic faith community, the Salvation Army, the Independent Church of Congo, the Kimbanguists, the Revival Church, and the Orthodox Church. In the absence of consensus, the six religious groups that agreed submitted their nomination of Denis Kadima as CENI head to the National Assembly. National Assembly deputies voted in a plenary session to approve the nomination. Following confirmation by President Felix Tshisekedi, Kadima took the oath of office on October 26.

The government and religious communities continued to maintain close relations, according to the media and religious leaders. Catholic leaders reported regular dialogue with members of the Presidency and the government on issues of human rights, women's empowerment, religious freedom, education, and security. In April, President Tshisekedi spoke at the International Kimbanguist Church Headquarters in Nkamba during the Church's 100th anniversary celebration. Local press said his presence reflected the influence of the Kimbanguist movement and its deference to state authorities, in contrast to Roman Catholics, whose leaders the media stated were often found on the front lines of social and political protests.

The Ministry of Justice again did not issue any final registration permits for religious groups and had not done so since 2014. The government, however, continued its practice of permitting groups to operate that were presumed to have approval, and unregistered domestic religious groups reported they continued to operate unhindered. Foreign-based religious groups stated they operated without restriction after applying for legal status. Under existing law, which remained under review, nonprofit organizations could operate as legal entities by default if a government ministry ruled favorably on their application and the government did not object to their application for status. According to 2015 registration statistics, the latest year for which the Ministry of Justice had statistics, there were 14,568 legally registered nonprofit organizations, 11,119 legal religious nonprofit organizations, and 1,073 foreign nonprofit organizations.

The government continued to rely on religious organizations to provide public services such as education and health care 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 public 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. Most schools were run by the Catholic Church.

In October, teachers in schools around the country, including those administered by religious organizations, organized strikes to protest the delay in the payment of their salaries, and, in one eastern city, over working conditions. Minister of Primary and Technical Education Tony Mwaba accused Catholic Church authorities of being behind the teachers' strike, and Secretary General of the Catholic Teachers' Union Jean-Bosco Puna prohibited the teachers from returning to the classroom until the strike was settled. Teachers returned to work in some schools in Kinshasa on November 8, and in the rest of the country in December, after the government signed a memorandum of understanding with the union agreeing to pay the teachers, including back pay and a one-time bonus, and standardize the distribution of payments.

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 in the military, police force, and hospitals despite a complaint filed in 2015 with the then president and his cabinet. Catholic, Protestant, and Kimbanguist chaplains continued to serve in the police force and the armed forces.

Actions of Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

ISIS-DRC continued to be active in the country. The group reportedly attacked civilians indiscriminately and regardless of religion, although most victims were Christian, reflecting their status as the majority religious group. Both local Christian and Muslim leaders, with vocal support from the government, condemned ISIS-DRC's attacks on civilians. According to a May report by the nongovernmental organization Kivu Security Tracker, the aim of the ISIS-DRC killings was to discredit and put pressure on government authorities, to divide the government forces pursuing them, and to divide society as a whole. In its report covering the period from January through June, the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) reported that ISIS-DRC continued to extend its control beyond the Ruwenzori sector in Beni territory, North Kivu Province, into the territories of Mambasa and Irumu in Ituri.

The BBC reported that an unknown assailant gunned down and killed Sheikh Ali Amini, a local Muslim leader, inside a mosque during evening prayers on May 1 in the eastern city of Beni. The cleric was a strong critic of Islamic militancy in the region. On May 18, several local and international media reported that an unknown assailant killed Sheikh Djamali Moussa, a prominent imam in Beni and a

leading civil society activist in the Mavivi community, as he returned from evening prayers near Beni. The imam was known for his regular alerts to the community on ISIS-DRC movements in the region.

News outlet France 24 and other media reported on a series of bombings on June 27 in Beni, after which local authorities closed markets, schools, and churches for 48 hours to prevent further attacks. The army and the head of a large civil society organization blamed the bombings on ISIS-DRC, and the Kivu Security Tracker said it suspected ISIS-DRC. One of the bombings targeted a Catholic church and was the first known bombing of a Catholic church in North Kivu Province. Following the bombings, the army spokesman announced authorities had arrested two suspects and intercepted their communications. Explaining the closure of schools, markets, and churches in the city, he said that the army did not want more than 10 people to gather at a time in order to prevent them from becoming targets of ISIS-DRC. The vicar general of the Catholic Diocese of Butembo-Beni said two women were injured in the church blast, which went off shortly before crowds were due to start gathering for a confirmation ceremony. Several hours after the church bombing, a suicide bomber died in an explosion outside a bar located approximately 100 yards from a mosque. In its July report covering the period from January through June, the UNJHRO said, “These attacks are clearly aimed at spreading terror among the population.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Local media outlet *Actualite.cd* on September 21 reported that armed men wearing police uniforms robbed a parish church in Bukavu, South Kivu Province, despite its proximity to a police sub-station, and assaulted the priests, tying them up, and stuffing a shirt into one priest’s mouth to prevent him from calling for help.

In August, RFI reported multiple instances of vandalism targeting Catholic churches in southwestern Kasai Province and southeastern Haut-Katanga Province. The Archbishop of Lubumbashi denounced the theft of a statue of the Virgin Mary and other items from Catholic places of worship within his jurisdiction. RFI reported further vandalism in October in western Kongo Central Province, where gunmen in a Protestant parish destroyed graves of Swedish missionaries. According to RFI, local civil society members condemned these acts, and some politicians described them as a reaction to these religious institutions’ frequent criticism of those in power. Some observers on social media explained the vandalism as merely the theft of valuable objects, and others suggested some perpetrators had hoped to gain spiritual power from stolen religious relics.

A representative of the Jehovah's Witnesses said there have been several attacks on members in the interior provinces, which he described as less tolerant of Jehovah's Witnesses than Kinshasa. The representative said the attacks included threats, beatings, and kidnappings, and took place in Kwilu Province in the west and Maniema Province in the east.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and embassy officers discussed with officials from the Ministry of Human Rights, Justice, Defense, and Interior religious freedom issues, including government relations with religious organizations. Embassy officials also regularly urged the government, security forces leaders, and community and political leaders to refrain from violence and to respect the rights of civil society, including of religious groups, to assemble and express themselves freely.

Throughout the year, embassy and Washington-based officials engaged members of the eight primary religious confessions and human rights organizations, especially in the eastern conflict-affected provinces. The Ambassador met with religious leaders frequently during visits to cities in the eastern provinces. In meetings with members and representatives of both the largest denominations and smaller faith communities, 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 practice their religion as they saw fit.