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2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Democratic Republic of the Congo

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. In April, NGOs and media reported 55 members of a “separatist religious movement” died in clashes with police after the group’s leader called on his followers to be “ruthless” in “chasing out” members of different ethnic groups.

Illegal armed group members targeted churches and church property in North Kivu and Ituri Provinces. Local leaders in the northern part of the country expressed concern over the presence of the nomadic Muslim Mbororo cattle-herder communities. Some leaders in the Christian-dominated northern provinces continued to describe this 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 it was difficult to categorize the clashes 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 101.8 million (midyear 2020 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, 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 Catholic. 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 religious beliefs. 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 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 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.

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 they offer religion as a subject.

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

Government Practices

Between April 13 and 24, according to NGO and media reports, police killed 55 members of a “separatist religious movement” and injured dozens more following demonstrations in which armed members of Bundu Dia Kongo (Gathering of Kongo – BDK) blocked roads and chanted slogans “inciting ethnic hatred” in towns in the west of the country. A Human Rights Watch report said police used excessive force when dispersing crowds and arresting members of the BDK, whose leader issued a statement April 12 urging followers to “ruthlessly... chase out” those who were not of Kongo ethnicity. In late April, the interior ministry said 22 BDK members died during two raids, one of which led to the arrest of the group’s leader, Ne Muanda Nsemi, for “rebellion, threatening state security, and incitement of tribal hatred.” Ne Muanda Nsemi was released after spending four months under observation in a psychiatric hospital. Military prosecutors said they took steps to investigate whether security forces committed unjustifiable killings, but they did not announce any prosecutions, although they previously communicated their intent to do so.

The government and religious communities maintained 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. Representatives from the Catholic Lay Community expressed support for what they called the government’s open stance regarding freedom of assembly and freedom of speech under President Felix Tshisekedi, who took office in January 2019. Leaders of the Church of Christ in Congo, an umbrella organization for the country’s Protestant communities, said in press statements that they believed Tshisekedi was committed to fighting corruption and advancing human rights, including religious freedom.

The Ministry of Justice again did not issue any final registration permits for religious groups, and had not done so since 2014. A ministry internal audit, reportedly in progress for several years and focused on fraudulent registration practices, remained incomplete at year’s end. It was cited by some observers as an obstacle to resuming the issuance of registrations. The government, however, continued its practice of permitting groups to operate that were presumed to have been approved. Unregistered domestic religious groups reported they continued to operate unhindered. The ministry 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 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. 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 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 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

Some religious leaders reported continued tensions between the overwhelmingly Christian local populations in the north and nomadic Muslim herder communities. Local leaders continued to express concerns that the 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. Civil society actors, including local Catholic priests, publicly warned that the conflict could worsen without significant intervention on the part of the national government. 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.

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, continued to carry out attacks against civilians and occasionally targeted churches for attack. On October 28, ADF assailants killed at least 18 persons and burned down a church in the eastern part of the country. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack. Additionally, in January, according to press reports, suspected ADF members attacked and killed dozens of individuals in four villages, including an Anglican pastor. During the year, the ADF reportedly killed over 500 civilians who were targeted for a variety of reasons, including religion. Local Christian and Muslim leaders, with vocal support from the government, condemned the ADF's actions.

Leaders of Jehovah's Witnesses reported generally positive relations with persons from other religious groups but said that at least 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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and embassy officers met with officials in the Presidency as well as from the Ministries of the Interior, Justice, Human Rights, and Education, 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 to respect the rights of civil society, including religious groups, to assemble and express themselves freely.

Throughout the year, embassy and Washington-based officials engaged with members of religious groups and human rights organizations. In meetings and discussions with members and representatives of the Catholic Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Church of Christ in Congo, the Muslim Association of Congo, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Anglican Church, the Kimbanguist Church, the Apostolic nunciature, and the 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.

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