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[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [2010 Report on International Religious Freedom](#) » [Africa](#) » Congo, Democratic Republic of the

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Congo, Democratic Republic of the

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR
International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government largely respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 905,000 square miles and a population of 70.9 million. The population is 50 percent Roman Catholic, 20 percent Protestant (including evangelicals), 10 percent Kimbanguist (a Christian inspired Congolese church), and 10 percent Muslim. Other religious groups represented in much smaller numbers include Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Orthodox Christians, and Jews. The remainder generally practices indigenous religious beliefs. Nearly 90 percent of the population attends religious services each week.

Most religious groups are scattered throughout the country and are widely represented in cities and large towns. Muslims are mainly concentrated in the provinces of Maniema, Orientale, and Kinshasa. Members of the ethnically based spiritual and political movement Bundu dia Mayala (BDM), formerly Bundia dia Kongo (BDK), reside predominantly in the Bas-Congo Province. After significant persecution in 2008, the organization was forced to change its name and purpose; BDM has not been able to gain official recognition as a political association although the religious branch of the group continued to meet secretly.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government regularly consulted with Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Kimbanguist, and Orthodox religious groups. The Consortium of Traditional Religious Leaders served as an informal forum for religious leaders to gather and discuss issues of concern. The government officially recognized the Church of Christ in Congo, which served as the umbrella group for Protestant churches. Pastor Albert Kankeza, committee chair of the evangelical churches, served as the religious representative during the June 30 Independence Day parade as invited by the government.

The government observes the following religious holiday as a national holiday: Christmas.

The National Media Regulatory Authority may suspend broadcast stations, religious or secular, for airing hate speech or calls for ethnic violence and not because of their religious affiliation. Various religious groups have their own radio stations. These include: Radio Maria, a Catholic station operating primarily in Bukavu; and the Islamic community broadcasting "The Voice of Africa" in Kinshasa and Kikwit. Broadcasts representing several Christian groups were heard throughout the day in Kinshasa, broadcast by private radio stations in both Kinshasa and nearby Brazzaville, capital of the Republic of the Congo.

A statutory order on the Regulation of Nonprofit Associations and Public Utilities provides for and regulates the establishment and operation of religious institutions. Requirements for the establishment of a religious organization are simple. The government grants tax exempt status to recognized religious organizations. A law regulating religious organizations grants civil servants the power to recognize, suspend recognition of, or dissolve religious groups. Although the law required officially recognized religious associations to maintain nonprofit status and respect the general public order, they can establish places of worship and train clergy.

A 2001 decree allows nonprofit organizations, including religious organizations, to operate without restriction provided they

registered with the government by submitting a copy of their bylaws and constitution. The government required religious groups to register; however, in practice unregistered religious groups operated unhindered. An October 2009 decree by the minister of justice required that all religious buildings be separated by at least 100 meters to reduce noise and neighborhood disruption. The decree appeared to target unregistered groups, but the government has not enforced it during the reporting period. The minister of justice also threatened to dissolve one branch of the Kimbanguiste church if the two branches did not reconcile, however, no action has been taken to implement this statement at the end of the reporting period.

The government requires foreign religious groups to obtain the approval of the president through the minister of justice; such groups generally operated without restriction once they received approval.

Religious groups operated many public schools, in which the government allowed them to provide religious instruction.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government largely respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In April 2010 police arrested three members of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ in Congo in Kinshasa and detained additional supporters who protested the initial arrests. Political involvement by the church leader has been cited as a possible reason for the arrests.

Although the government committed to a judicial investigation, there was no investigation into the police crackdown on the BDK in Bas-Congo in 2008, where police reportedly killed at least 100 BDK adherents and razed BDK houses and temples. The government did not take any further action in prosecuting those responsible for the attacks. The organization changed its name to Bunda dia Mayala and is pursuing political party recognition while quietly continuing its religious practices.

There were no reports of religious prisoners in the country; however, several religious individuals were detained for political reasons. In 2009 a Catholic priest assigned to Saint Anne's Catholic Church was detained for 24 hours after making political statements during Sunday Mass.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There continued to be credible reports that families abandoned or abused persons, including children, accused of witchcraft.

As in past reporting periods, there were reports of individuals being attacked, tortured, killed, or driven from their homes when accused of being witches. While "witch" is an imprecise term that is often applied to persons with developmental, behavioral, and psychological problems, there was a common belief that some persons have the power to cast spells on others or were possessed by demons. Such actions commonly follow a death that family members attributed to the work of a witch. Accusations of witchcraft can cause widespread fear in a community.

In October a priest and two nuns were killed in Bukavu, South Kivu over a two day period. It appeared that these three individuals were targeted for their political statements and affiliations and not because of their religious persuasion.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The embassy met regularly with leaders of the major religions in the country to discuss the relationship with both the government and U.S. government. Embassy officials, including the ambassador, participated in many religious communities' events to promote religious freedom. In September 2009 the ambassador met with the heads of the major religious groups to discuss religious tolerance specifically in a post-9/11 environment.

In November 2009 an embassy official accepted an invitation to meet with Simon Kimbangu Kiangana, the head of the Kimbanguiste Church to discuss peace in the Congo, to reaffirm the good relations between the church and the U.S. government, and to highlight U.S. commitment to religious tolerance and freedom.

The embassy has actively engaged the Muslim community, inviting its leaders to key outreach events, including viewings of President Obama's speeches of key issues linked to U.S. relations with the Muslim world. The public affairs section also regularly distributed information materials to Muslim leaders, and, in return, received numerous texts on Islam for use in the Information Resource Center. The public affairs section also continued to include Muslim communities (as well as other religious groups) in the embassy-run Access English Microscholarship program. All activities integrated key messages related to interreligious tolerance, and promoted discussions and exchanges among participants on issues of religious tolerance.

[Back to Top](#)

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