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USDOS – US Department of State

2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Angola

Executive Summary

The constitution defines the state as secular, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for freedom of religion. The religious freedom law requires religious groups to seek government recognition by meeting legally established criteria. There are 81 recognized religious groups and more than 1,000 unrecognized religious groups. The government has not recognized any new religious groups since passage in 2004 of a law that requires religious groups to have at least 100,000 citizens as members. On October 16, the government issued a joint executive decree mandating that all unregistered religious groups operating in the country submit registration documents within 30 days or the government would force them to cease operations. The decree superseded a 2015 government circular permitting unregistered religious groups to incorporate within ecumenical associations, which the decree abolished. At year's end, according to the Ministry of Culture, which oversees the registration process, 94 unregistered religious groups had submitted their files for recognition. On November 6, the government launched the nationwide Operation Rescue law enforcement campaign to combat criminality, including the operation of unlicensed associations. At year's end, the government reported the closure of more than 900 houses of worship, including eight mosques. On December 1, the Order of Evangelical Pastors of Angola protested in Luanda against the decree's abolishment of the ecumenical associations and violation of freedom of religion. The government continued to state its concern about the proliferation of religious "sects," some of which the government said exploited vulnerable populations. In President Joao Lourenco's address to parliament on October 15, he reaffirmed the government's commitment to respect freedom of religion, but stressed the government would not tolerate churches that operated solely as for-profit businesses and preyed on poor and vulnerable segments of the population. In July the Supreme Court invalidated a 2015 decree issued by the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights (MJHR) recognizing the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the World as the only legitimate Tocoist church in the country. The court ruled that it was not the role of the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights to unify the different religious denominations in the country, but rather only to ensure religious groups obeyed the law. On December 4, activists asked President Lourenco to review the cases of four Angolan Muslims convicted in 2017 of preparatory acts to establish a terrorist cell and sentenced to three years in prison. Human rights activists criticized the convictions as politically orchestrated by the government and lacking evidence. The defendants said the prosecution discriminated against them because of their Muslim faith.

Some leaders of legally recognized religious organizations continued to criticize the proliferation of smaller, unrecognized religious groups, while they also acknowledged the need for greater religious understanding and interfaith dialogue.

Throughout the year, the embassy raised religious freedom issues, including long-pending registration applications and the drafting of the new religious freedom legislation with government officials. The Ambassador and embassy officials met with representatives of religious groups and civil society organizations and discussed their views regarding the government’s concern with the proliferation of churches, and also discussed efforts to promote interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 30.4 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2014 national census, approximately 41 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 38 percent Protestant. Individuals not associated with any religious group constitute 12 percent of the population. The remaining 10 percent is composed of animists, Muslims, Jews, Baha’is, and other religious groups. While the 2014 census reported there were an estimated 103,000 Muslims in the country, one leader of a Muslim organization stated there could be as many as 800,000, including an unknown number of Muslim migrants mainly from North and West African countries. There are approximately 350 Jews, primarily foreign residents.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution defines the state as secular and prohibits religious discrimination. The constitution requires the state to protect churches and religious groups as long as they comply with the law. The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, religious belief, and worship, and recognizes the right of religious groups to organize and carry out their activities as long as they adhere to the law. The constitution permits conscientious objection for religious reasons, prohibits questioning individuals about their religious beliefs for reasons other than anonymous statistical purposes, and specifies religious rights may not be suspended even if the state declares a state of war, siege, or emergency. It recognizes the right of prisoners to receive visits from, and correspond with, religious counselors. The law establishes that conscientious objectors may perform civilian service as an alternative to military service.

The 2004 religious freedom law requires religious groups to register for legal recognition from the state. Legal recognition gives religious groups the ability to purchase property collectively and use their property to hold religious events, exempts them from paying certain property taxes, and authorizes a group to be treated as an incorporated entity in the court system. To apply for government recognition, a religious group must collect 100,000 member signatures from legal residents in at least 12 of the 18 provinces and submit them to the MJHR. The law also requires religious

groups to submit documents defining their organizational structure, methods of worship, leadership, the amount of time the group has operated in the country, and that their doctrine be in accordance with principles and rights in the constitution.

On October 16, the government issued a joint executive decree mandating all unregistered religious groups submit the necessary registration documents or cease operations by November 4. The joint decree superseded a 2015 MJHR circular that established four ecumenical associations and required all unrecognized religious group to incorporate within one of the ecumenical associations in order to operate.

While the MJHR is responsible for registration and recognition of religious groups, oversight of religious organizations is the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture through its National Institute for Religious Affairs.

Religious instruction is not a component of the public educational system. Private schools are allowed to teach religion.

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

Government Practices

On October 16, a joint executive decree revoked the 2015 MJHR circular, thereby abolishing the ecumenical associations and mandating all unregistered religious groups to submit within 30 days individual requests for recognition or cease operations. The government began closing churches in November after the 30-day period came to an end. At year's end, the government reported it had closed more than 900 houses of worship, including eight mosques. By year's end, 94 unregistered religious groups submitted their files for recognition. The number of officially recognized religious groups remained at 81. At year's end, the government had not recognized any new religious groups.

Government officials at the highest levels continued to state concern about the proliferation of religious “sects,” some of which were alleged to have exploited vulnerable populations with limited financial means by requiring them to provide recurring payments or dues to worship or belong to these organizations. In President Lourenco's address to parliament on October 15, he reaffirmed the government's commitment to respect freedom of religion, but stressed the government would not tolerate churches that operate solely as for-profit businesses and prey on poor and vulnerable segments of the population.

The government continued not to recognize any Muslim groups officially or issue any licenses to Muslim groups to practice their religion legally. The Muslim community requested official recognition of its groups but was unable to meet the requirements of the 2004 law, including having 100,000 legal members and a religious doctrine aligned with the country's constitution. In the past, government officials had stated some practices allowed by Islam, such as polygamy, contradicted the constitution. The Islamic

Community of Angola (COIA) as well the Islamic Foundation of Angola (FIA) requested official recognition following the October 16 joint executive decree. According to COIA, there were 69 unregistered mosques in the country.

The Baha'i Faith and the Global Messianic Church remained the only two non-Christian organizations legally registered prior to the 2004 law.

On November 6, the government launched the nationwide Operation Rescue law enforcement campaign to combat criminality, including the operation of unlicensed religious groups.

Some religious leaders, civil society members, and media outlets continued to accuse the government of trying to coerce religious groups to align themselves with the ruling party in exchange for authorization to operate freely.

On December 1, there was a protest in Luanda against the closing of churches under Operation Rescue organized by the Order of Evangelical Pastors of Angola (OPEA). OPEA stated the government's closure of churches violated freedom of religion and involved the use of excessive force and coercive power. OPEA also said police engaged in violence against pastors, some of whom police arbitrarily detained, and violated the sanctity of their churches. The leader of COIA said Operation Rescue violated the exercise of freedom of religion because eight mosques were closed despite the fact that COIA submitted registration documentation by November 4, in accordance with the new joint executive decree. Pastors in Lubango from the Church of the Christian Coalition in Angola and Christian Vision Church criticized the government's failure to consult religious leaders before abolishing the ecumenical associations.

On July 24, the Huambo Provincial Court tried and convicted 32-year-old Justino Tchipango, deputy leader of the Light of the World religious group, and sentenced him to 18 years in prison for the killing of nine police officers during clashes in 2015 between law enforcement and followers of the religious group in Mount Sumi, Huambo Province.

The leader of the Light of the World religious group, Jose Kalupeteka, sentenced to 28 years in prison in 2016 by the Huambo Provincial Court for the killing of nine police officers, appealed to the Supreme Court, but there was no decision on the appeal at year's end. On December 18, authorities transferred Kalupeteka from prison in Benguela to his native province of Huambo at the request of his family, which along with civil society had requested the transfer since his sentencing. Civil society groups maintained Kalupeteka's trial and conviction were politically motivated and called on the government to open an independent investigation during the year.

On July 30, the Supreme Court invalidated a 2015 decree issued by the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights recognizing the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the World as the only legitimate Tocoist church in the country. The court ruled it is not the role of the MJHR to unify the different religious denominations in the country, but rather only to ensure religious groups obey the law.

On January 8, President Lourenco announced the government would allow Catholic radio station Ecclesia to extend its signal beyond Luanda Province to other provinces. Radio Ecclesia submitted a request to operate nationwide in 2009, but the previous government never approved the request. During the year, Radio Ecclesia began to operate in several additional provinces.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some leaders of legally recognized religious organizations continued to criticize the proliferation of smaller, unrecognized religious groups, while they also acknowledged the need for greater religious understanding and interfaith dialogue.

Leaders of unrecognized churches criticized the October joint executive decree for terminating the ecumenical associations, shutting down places of worship, and detention of members of those congregations during Operation Rescue.

Journalists and human rights organizations criticized the conviction of four young Muslims in 2017 on terrorism charges and the 2016 murder conviction of Jose Kalupeteka, leader of the Light of the World religious group, arguing that in both cases the trials were politically motivated and marred by religious bias. Activists urged the government to reopen the cases.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Throughout the year the embassy raised religious freedom issues with government officials, including long-pending registration applications and the drafting of the new religious freedom law.

Embassy officials met with religious leaders and civil society representatives to discuss religious freedom issues and expanded outreach to religious communities. Embassy officials met with representatives of the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities and civil society, and discussed their reaction to the government’s stated concerns about the proliferation of churches. They also discussed the status of pending recognitions, the proposed law on religion freedom, efforts to promote increased interfaith dialogue, and the impact of Operation Rescue on religious groups. In August embassy officials attended a celebration of Eid al-Adha at a Luanda mosque, at the invitation of COIA. At the invitation of the Tocoist church, the Ambassador attended a ceremony at the Tocoist church. Embassy officers discussed religious freedom issues with representatives of multiple religious groups and organizations, including the Congregation of Christian Churches in Angola, Tocoists, the Order of Angolan Evangelical Pastors, Jesuit Refugee Services, MOSAIKO (a Catholic-based organization), Norwegian Church Aid, COIA, FIA, Chabad of Angola, and Radio Ecclesia, among others.

ecoi.net summary:

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