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Angola

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 481,351 square miles, and its population is approximately 14.3 million. Christianity is the religion of the vast majority of the country's population, with Roman Catholicism as the country's largest single denomination. The Roman Catholic Church claims 5 million adherents, but such figures could not be verified. The major Protestant denominations also are present, along with a number of Brazilian Christian and indigenous African denominations. The largest Protestant denominations, which include Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists (United Church of Christ), and Assemblies of God, claim to have 3 million to 5 million adherents. The largest syncretic religious group is the Kimbanguist Church, whose followers believe that a mid-20th century Congolese pastor named Joseph Kimbangu was a prophet. A small portion of the country's rural population practices animism or traditional indigenous religions. There is a small Islamic community, less than 1 percent of the population, comprising mainly migrants from West Africa. There are few declared atheists in the country.

Following independence in 1975, the Government imposed restrictions on foreign-based missionaries, expelling many. However, since 1992, foreign-based missionaries have been able to return to the country and, following the April 2002 cease-fire ending the civil war, have returned to the interior of the country as the security situation has improved.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Government requires religious groups to register with the Ministries of Justice and Culture; groups must provide general background information to register. The Government has shut down several unregistered religious groups. In March the National Assembly unanimously approved a law establishing stricter criteria for the registration of religious groups. The law sets benchmarks for the number of adherents and congregations in the country needed to qualify for legal status. The Government passed the law as a protection against unregulated organizations posing as religious institutions. Major religious organizations supported the legislation. The

Ministries of Justice and Culture currently recognize 83 denominations. There are reportedly over 800 other religious organizations, many of which are Congolese- or Brazilian-based Christian evangelical organizations that have not yet had action taken on their registration applications. Colonial-era statutes banned all non-Christian religious groups from the country; while those statutes have not been repealed, they no longer are enforced. In early 2002, the colonial-era law granting civil registration authority to the religious groups was reinstated.

The Government permits religious organizations and missions to establish and operate schools.

The country's religious leaders have taken an active role in promoting the peace and national reconciliation process and President dos Santos has consulted with them on constitutional and electoral issues.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. In March 2004, the Minister of Justice again publicly warned that the colonial-era law banning non-Christian religions, while not regularly enforced, remained the law and could be enforced against any radical religious groups advocating terrorism or public disturbances.

Members of the clergy regularly use their pulpits to criticize government policies. In February 2003, government officials sharply criticized Catholic Church-owned Radio Ecclesia's call-in shows in which participants criticized the Government. However, Radio Ecclesia continued to host the call-in shows during the period covered by this report. In May President dos Santos said publicly that Radio Ecclesia could operate nationwide. Radio Ecclesia's operators began taking steps to begin nationwide broadcasting by August.

During the period covered by this report, 17 religious groups remained banned in Cabinda on charges of practicing medicine on the groups' members, of illegally holding religious services in residences, and of not being registered. In October 2003, five ministers in Cabinda were sentenced to 35 days in jail for disobeying local authorities' orders to stop holding services in private residences and places of business.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There have been reports in some poor, rural areas and secondary cities of children being accused of witchcraft. In the worst instances, these accusations have led to neglect, abuse, injury, or death.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. There is a functioning ecumenical movement, particularly in support of the peace and reconciliation movement. Groups involved include the ecumenical Inter-Church Committee for Peace in Angola and the Catholic Pro-Peace movement.

Clergy members support new legal requirements to address the growing number of unregistered religious groups in rural provinces. There also was continuing hostility against

traditional religions that involve shamans.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

U.S. Embassy officials and official visitors from the United States routinely meet with the country's religious leaders in the context of peacekeeping, democratization, development, and humanitarian relief efforts. Church groups are key members of the country's civil society movement and are consulted regularly by Embassy officials. Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, the Country Director of the U.S. Agency for International Development, and others, maintain an ongoing dialogue with the leadership of the country's religious denominations. The U.S. Government provides financial support to Radio Ecclesia to increase its public affairs and news programming as an independent alternative source of information to citizens. During the period covered by this report, the Embassy began funding dissemination of human and civil rights information through an ecumenical newsletter network.

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