

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

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

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were no 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 132,000 square miles and a population between 2.8 million and 3.2 million. Approximately half of its citizens are Christian. An estimated 90 percent of the Christians are Roman Catholic; others include Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses. There is a growing Muslim community, estimated at 2 percent of the population. Most Muslim workers in urban centers are immigrants from West Africa, Lebanon, and North Africa. The West African Muslim immigrants arrived mainly from Mali, Benin, Togo, Mauritania, and Senegal. The Lebanese are primarily Sunni Muslims. There is also a significant Chadian Muslim population.

The remainder of the population is made up of practitioners of traditional indigenous religious beliefs, those who belong to various messianic groups, and those who practice no religion. A small minority of Christians practice Kimbanguism, a syncretistic movement that originated in the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Mystical or messianic practices (particularly among the ethnic Lari population in the Pool region) have been associated with opposition political movements, including some elements of the armed insurrection in the southern part of the country from 1997 to 2003.

Section II. Status of 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 law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution specifically forbids discrimination on the basis of religion.

All organizations, including religious organizations, businesses, unions, and charitable or nonprofit societies, must register with and be approved by the Government. There were no reports of discrimination against religious groups in this process, although there is widespread agreement it is time-consuming and lengthy. Penalties for failure to register include fines and potential confiscation of goods, invalidation of contracts, and deportation for foreigners, but no criminal penalties are applicable. Even after groups have registered, it is not uncommon for police or other governmental officials to summon leaders or organizers, request information about the group, and assess a fee of \$48 (20,000 FCFA) for providing the requested materials. However, there were no reports of religious groups being singled out in this process during the reporting period.

The Government observes Christmas, Easter Monday, Ascension, Pentecost, and All Saints' Day as national holidays. Islamic holy days are not nationally observed; however, they are respected. For example, employers grant leave for those who wish to observe holy days not on the national calendar.

In policy and practice, religion was generally not taught in public schools.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Although uncommon, interreligious marriage was generally socially acceptable. Religious tolerance was greater in urban areas than in rural areas. In some forest communities where there are pygmy populations, there was some discrimination against them in education and employment as well as intolerance for their cultural practices, including at times their animist religious practices.

A joint ecumenical council, which met in February 2008, represented all organized religious groups.

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. These discussions included highlighting the importance of religious freedom with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the president, nongovernmental organizations, and members of the National Assembly.