

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The interim constitution, known as the Transitional National Charter, and the new constitution, which came into effect on March 30, provide for freedom of religion and equal protection under the law regardless of religion. They prohibit all forms of religious intolerance and “religious fundamentalism.” Government officials exercised limited control or influence in most of the country and police and the gendarmerie failed to stop or punish abuses committed by militias, including abductions, physical abuse, and gender based violence. The mostly Christian anti-Balaka militia forces and the predominantly Muslim ex-Seleka militia forces continued to occupy territories in the western and northern parts of the country, respectively. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) reported that clashes between the anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka militias in September resulted in the death of six Christian civilians and the injury of one peacekeeper. The death of an ex-Seleka fighter in October sparked a large clash in a northern town. According to reports, ex-Seleka fighters attacked the northern, predominantly Christian town of Kaga Bandoro, including an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp, a Catholic Church compound, and a school, which resulted in 30 people dead and more than 40 wounded. The Muslim community reported continued discrimination, including when requesting government services. According to one witness, Muslim truck drivers were systematically singled out at security checkpoints, harassed, and forced to pay money to police, gendarmerie, and the Central African Armed Forces (FACA).

During the year, outbreaks of violence between Muslim and Christian citizens and residents continued, involving members of competing armed groups, including the anti-Balaka and the ex-Seleka forces. There were several separate incidents reported of violence between individual Muslims and Christians, followed by subsequent retaliation attacks. According to MINUSCA, on June 11, an assailant robbed and stabbed a Muslim motorcycle taxi driver to death in Bangui. On October 20, assailants killed a Muslim man in Bangui, cut his remains into pieces, and deposited them at the Central Mosque. On November 17, three Muslim men were conveyed to the Kouango health center following an attack by a group of anti-Balaka militiamen in Bangao and Pende. In October an armed gang killed a high-ranking military officer in the Muslim enclave PK5, with further sectarian violence ensuing within the capital. The media continued to portray the Muslim

community negatively. Bangui's Lakouanga Mosque reopened after being destroyed twice in recent years.

On separate occasions, the Ambassador, the U.S. Ambassador to the UN, an Assistant Secretary of State, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, and the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with government and religious leaders to discuss the impact of the ongoing conflict among religious groups, challenges faced by the Muslim community, and ways to promote the return of IDPs to their homes and to foster religious tolerance. In July the U.S. Ambassador joined President Faustin-Archange Touadera for a visit to Bangui's Lakouanga Mosque for the Eid al-Fitr holiday. The Ambassador and embassy officials met regularly with Christian and Muslim religious leaders to discuss their relationship with the new government, reports of religious discrimination, and the role of religious groups in reconciliation efforts.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.5 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2003 census, the population is 51 percent Protestant, 29 percent Roman Catholic, 10 percent Muslim, and 4.5 percent other religious groups, with 5.5 percent having no religious beliefs. The nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Oxfam and Coef5 estimate the percentage of Muslims at up to 15 percent. Some Christians and Muslims incorporate aspects of indigenous beliefs into their religious practices.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Transitional National Charter, adopted in 2013, and the constitution, adopted by referendum in December 2015 and which went into effect on March 30 when the newly elected president was inaugurated, both provide for freedom of religion under conditions set by law and equal protection under the law regardless of religion. They prohibit all forms of religious intolerance and "religious fundamentalism," which is not defined in law. They specify an oath of office for the head of state made "before God" that includes a promise to fulfill the duties of the office without any consideration of religion or faith.

Religious groups, except for indigenous religious groups, are required to register with the Ministry of the Interior, Public Security, and Territorial Administration.

To register, religious groups must prove they have a minimum of 1,000 members and their leaders have adequate religious education, as judged by the ministry.

The law permits the ministry to deny registration to any religious group it deems offensive to public morals or likely to disturb social peace, and to suspend the operation of registered religious groups if it finds their activities subversive. Registration is free and confers official recognition and certain benefits, such as customs duty exemptions for vehicles or equipment. There are no penalties prescribed for groups that fail to register.

The law does not prohibit religious instruction in public or private schools, but it is not part of the public school curriculum.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

According to media reports and religious and civil society leaders, civilian authorities did not maintain effective control over the security forces. Human rights organizations stated the government did not take steps to investigate and prosecute officials who committed violations, whether in the security forces or elsewhere in the government, which they stated was a longstanding problem and one that fostered a climate of impunity. In June the government removed the commander of the Central Office for the Repression of Banditry following accusations of extrajudicial killings, but did not investigate or punish suspected perpetrators of human rights abuses.

Muslims continued to report harassment outside of PK5, a Muslim enclave in Bangui, and exclusion from national decision making. Muslim leaders cited situations where Muslims were treated as outsiders or as a different class of citizens, especially when requesting government services. Muslim leaders were reportedly harassed, beaten, and restricted from free movement in the country. According to a group of Muslim youth, after being identified as Muslim (by name or by appearance) by government officials, they were charged bribes and other fees exceeding those charged to Christians.

According to a truck driver in the PK5 neighborhood, when driving between Bangui and Bambari in September, Muslim drivers were systematically singled out at security checkpoints, harassed, and forced to pay money to police, gendarmerie,

and FACA. The driver stated that officials seized and destroyed identity cards or other official documents of those who did not pay.

On June 24, the interior minister issued a statement that security services should not arrest citizens on the basis of their religion in response to an incident where members of the ex-Seleka in PK5 took six police officers hostage.

In February during his inaugural address, President Touadera pledged to be “the protector of the weak and the defender of the rights of all citizens, without exception.” Touadera appointed three Muslim ministers to his 23-member cabinet. Media sources reported his actions were intended to send a message of reconciliation which was reflected in the composition of the government. In previous years, the government received some criticism for not appointing more Muslims into senior government positions. In March a Muslim was elected president of the National Assembly.

Some government officials stated they intended to focus efforts on reconciliation among religious groups, although observers stated they made limited progress by year’s end. Following elections in March, President Touadera listed reconciliation among one of the highest priorities of the new administration and subsequently created the position of presidential advisor for national reconciliation. In his June 7 address to the National Assembly, Prime Minister Simplicie Sarandji announced the government would establish a Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation Commission intended to reconcile differences across religious lines, among other objectives. The commission was not active at year’s end. The Ministry of Social Affairs and National Reconciliation announced plans to establish Local Peace and Reconciliation Committees throughout the country, in accordance with a recommendation adopted at the May 2015 Bangui Forum. The committees were officially launched by President Touadera on December 21 in Bangui.

On June 27, President Touadera hosted an iftar at the presidential palace, reportedly the first time that a Central African president has done so. The government declared July 5 a public holiday in observance of Eid al-Fitr and September 12 a public holiday in observance of Eid al-Adha. The two holidays were added to the official permanent calendar of national holidays. Unlike corresponding Christian holidays, however, both were unpaid.

On September 14, President Touadera visited the Catholic Church of Fatima in the third district of Bangui where he joined a large congregation for Mass on the occasion of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. At the end of the Mass,

the president delivered a speech encouraging the faithful to engage in social cohesion and donated money to support the IDPs taking refuge at the church compound.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Armed groups, which generally operated freely in certain areas of the country, committed many of the actions affecting religious freedom. The government remained incapable of imposing its authority throughout the territory, preventing violations or ensuring the rule of law and the administration of justice, according to many observers.

Armed groups, such as the anti-Balaka (mostly Christian) and ex-Seleka (mostly Muslim), controlled significant swaths of territory throughout the country and acted as de facto governing institutions, according to media and UN reports. Police and gendarmerie failed to stop or punish abuses committed by the ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka militias, including abductions, physical mistreatment, extortion, killings, and gender-based violence.

MINUSCA was deployed to multiple areas within the country in response to the rising violence between anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka elements in the second half of the year.

According to MINUSCA, clashes between the anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka militias broke out on September 16 in Kaga Bandoro, which resulted in the death of six Christian civilians and the injury of one peacekeeper.

The death of an ex-Seleka fighter on October 11 was quickly followed by a large clash in the northern town of Kaga Bandoro. According to reports, ex-Seleka fighters attacked the predominantly Christian town, including an IDP camp, a Catholic Church compound, and a school, which resulted in 30 people dead – including 12 ex-Seleka fighters – and over 40 wounded. According to MINUSCA, a local peace committee secured commitments from anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka fighters to allow freedom of movement for the local population which it said helped reduce tensions.

On October 4, an armed gang killed Marcel Mobeka, a high-ranking FACA military officer, in PK5. After Mobeka was killed, anti-Balaka and FACA elements killed several Muslims. President Touadera and his security team promised to apprehend the men responsible for the retaliatory killings; however,

the government took no known action. The individuals responsible for killing Mobeka remained under the protection of ex-Seleka. According to the government, the act further fueled the sectarian violence within the capital.

On June 19, ex-Seleka fighters took six police officers hostage in the PK5 neighborhood. Police reported at least two people were shot and killed in the chaos. The police officers were released on June 24. According to media reports, the kidnapping was a retaliatory action after police arrested 26 residents suspected of illegally bringing in arms. The following day, fighting erupted within PK5 between MINUSCA and ex-Seleka elements, leading to the closing of the neighborhood's sole police station. As of the end of the year, the police station had not reopened, which Muslim sources said contributed to greater insecurity within PK5.

On October 23, following the funeral of a Muslim who had been killed by anti-Balaka fighters in the village of Barya in Kouï, an unknown number of Muslim community members and fighters from the armed group Return, Reclamation, and Rehabilitation (3R) killed one Christian man in retaliation. The 3R, comprising hundreds of predominantly Muslim armed fighters, was formed to protect the ethnic Peulh minority from anti-Balaka militias and controlled territory along the border with Cameroon, according to an international human rights organization.

According to the July UN Report of the Independent Expert, between January and June there were 63 documented cases of violence against people accused of practicing witchcraft. The report stated that for the most part anti-Balaka forces located in the capital and in the western part of the country committed these acts. Women were the most frequently accused, except in Bangui where these accusations were levied mainly against children. The report stated that accusations of witchcraft were more often than not actually attempts by armed groups to extort money from the victims.

MINUSCA reported that on August 29, ex-Seleka elements assaulted a 62-year-old man for practicing witchcraft near the town of Bria. MINUSCA also reported that on November 7 two suspected anti-Balaka individuals in Bandjiti village killed a 55-year-old woman accused of witchcraft.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

While most observers stated violent conflict and instability in the country had other sources, religion continued to be used as a tool to divide the population. Many but

not all members of the ex-Seleka and its factions were Muslim, having originated in neighboring countries or in the remote Muslim north. Members of the anti-Balaka were mostly Christian and continued to control the western part of the country. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On June 11, an assailant robbed and stabbed to death a Muslim motorcycle taxi driver in Bangui. The killing was reportedly regarded as a direct attack on Muslims by many in the PK5 neighborhood. Two Christians were subsequently killed on June 12, in what observers described as a revenge killing in response to the incident the night before.

According to MINUSCA, on October 20, assailants killed a Muslim man in Bangui, cut his remains into pieces, and deposited them at the Central Mosque. In retaliation, assailants abducted a Christian man, although it was unclear whether he was safely returned to his family.

On October 23, MINUSCA reported a Muslim was severely beaten and presumed dead following a fight with a Christian and thrown into the Sangha River. He reportedly regained consciousness and was rescued by Muslims.

On November 17, individuals conveyed three Muslim men to the Kouango health center following an attack by a group of anti-Balaka militiamen in Bangao and Pende. The town was reportedly deserted the next morning and seven houses were burned.

On November 6, a government official and a Muslim community leader each confirmed that four men armed with automatic weapons and hand grenades interrupted a church service in Bangui's predominantly Muslim third district and threatened the worshippers. The men chased members of the congregation and caused some damage to church property. The individuals were arrested shortly after the incident by members of a self-defense group and later released.

The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Bangui led an interfaith peace march on October 12 through the third district.

Hate speech and negative comments about or directed toward Muslims were still common in most media outlets. Private media outlets reportedly continued to be heavily influenced by their financiers, generally representing a Christian perspective, and led by Christian editors. There has been no Muslim-operated

radio station or Muslim-oriented program on the national radio station since September 2015.

Muslims continued to report facing consistent social discrimination, including an inability to move freely and therefore feeling “marginalized” by a lack of access to schools, hospitals, and basic necessities, including services provided by the government, as well as those provided by private donors and organizations. One imam in PK5 raised concerns about discrimination due to religious beliefs and the difficulties in carrying out commercial activities. Muslims also expressed a general discomfort in wearing traditional dress outside of the PK5 enclave, stating it drew negative attention or comments from non-Muslims.

Muslims reported facing several challenges within their community, including identity, discrimination, and internal division over leadership. A conference focused on intra-Muslim dialogue in Vienna from February 25-26 to address concerns over leadership, the marginalization of Muslim women in social cohesion work, policies and practices of discrimination against Muslims, and the role of Islam in the country.

The Lakouanga Mosque in Bangui, destroyed for a second time during intercommunal violence in September 2015, reopened in April. A Muslim cemetery in Bangui closed in October due to ongoing tensions reopened on December 13.

The Muslim community in the third district and the Christian community of Bimbo signed a “nonaggression and community reconciliation pact” at a public ceremony on February 11. The pact guaranteed free access for Muslims to an important Muslim burial ground in Bimbo’s Boeing neighborhood. Muslims had been unable to access the cemetery since September 2015 and were forced to bury their deceased at home. The pact was reported as a step forward for interfaith relations.

On December 11, Muslims and Christians attended a symbolic reconciliation ceremony at a Mass at Bangui stadium.

The Interreligious Platform, consisting of members from the Protestant, Catholic and Muslim faiths, continued to spread messages of peace and reconciliation throughout the country. In September the platform outlined its plan to expand the scope and geographical reach of its activities, including the establishment of health clinics, vocational education programs, and a radio station to promote peace and

social cohesion. According to the Interreligious Platform, the newly elected government had a perceived lack of interest in engaging with it.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador raised religious freedom concerns and encouraged outreach to all religious communities in high-level meetings, including with President Touadera, the presidential advisor for national reconciliation, and the minister of social affairs and reconciliation.

The Ambassador and embassy officials engaged regularly with religious leaders, including the leaders of the Interreligious Platform, the Imam of the Central Mosque, and the Coordinating Committee for Central African Muslim Organizations on issues related to religious freedom and reconciliation, and discussed ways to broaden access and dialogue to elected officials.

In January the Ambassador met with members of a Muslim Youth Association and a Muslim student organization to discuss the concerns of young Muslims and ways to promote tolerance and social cohesion.

In May the Ambassador delivered remarks at the Central African Interfaith Peacebuilding Partnership launching ceremony. In June the embassy organized a leadership training workshop on resolving identity-based conflicts. Participants included imams, youth leaders, women, and members of community-based organizations in PK5. The program came about after community members stated that the neighborhood suffered from a divisive identity crisis that interfered with reconciliation.

In February the Ambassador attended the burial of three Muslims who had been killed in a car accident. The event was the first burial at the Muslim cemetery in the Boeing community in predominantly Christian Bimbo following the signing of the “nonaggression and community reconciliation pact” between Christians in Bimbo and Muslims in the third district. Muslims had previously been unable to access the cemetery.

On July 6, the U.S. Ambassador joined President Touadera for a visit to Bangui’s Lakouanga Mosque for Eid al-Fitr. The president called the mosque, which was rebuilt after being destroyed during the intercommunal violence in September 2015, a “symbol of reconciliation.”

During a visit in March the U.S. Ambassador to the UN delivered remarks at a reception honoring the inauguration of President Touadera in which she paid tribute to the religious leadership in the country and its work to promote peace. She also traveled to the Boeing community in Bimbo to visit the site of the Muslim cemetery. While there, the UN Ambassador participated in a meeting with Christian and Muslim members of the community to hear their concerns and express U.S. commitment to peace and reconciliation.

During a visit in September and October, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with Muslim and Christian leaders, government officials, and residents of Christian and Muslim IDP camps to discuss progress on religious tolerance and reconciliation since the installation of the elected government. He also discussed continuing challenges faced by citizens, especially Muslims and IDPs.

In October a visiting Assistant Secretary of State met with senior government and UN officials, civil society, and religious leaders to discuss issues related to reconciliation and inclusivity, the protection of civilians and atrocity prevention, and community violence reduction. He visited PK5 and met with residents to better understand the ongoing struggles faced by Muslims in Bangui under the new government; he also met with the Imam of the Central Mosque.

In April a visiting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, along with the U.S. Ambassador, visited Bangui's Central Mosque. He also met with Muslim leaders, officials from the newly installed government, and residents of Muslim and Christian IDP camps to discuss challenges facing the Muslim community, particularly in the PK5 district, and displaced persons.

In February the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, the Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic States, and an embassy official participated in the conference in Vienna focused on intra-Muslim dialogue and capacity building in the Central African Republic. In their remarks, both the Ambassador at Large and the Special Envoy reiterated the U.S. government remains a committed partner to faith communities in the country and encouraged religious solidarity, tolerance, and a peaceful resolution to ongoing conflict.

An officer from the Department of State's Office of International Religious Freedom visited Bangui in June to meet with religious leaders, Muslim and Christian youth, and civil society organizations working on mediation programs in

Bangui. The embassy increased its outreach to Muslim youth and community members in its public events and program of exchanges to the United States.

On June 29, the U.S. Ambassador hosted an iftar, bringing together members of the Muslim community and non-Muslim government officials and representatives of international organizations. During the iftar, the Ambassador asked all participants to adhere to a sense of community and mutual understanding while also promoting peace and stability. There were 48 participants, including representatives from 20 Muslim organizations, the Interreligious Platform, the minister of reconciliation, the presidential advisor on reconciliation, and two of the cabinet's four Muslim ministers.