



Democratic Republic of Congo

Stable / Unchanged —

Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **95.1%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **2.4%**
- Muslims : **1.4%**
- Others : **1.1%**

79.723.000

2.344.858 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The 2006 constitution of the Democratic Republic of Congo upholds the secular character of the state and proclaims respect for religious pluralism. Article 13 forbids all forms discrimination on grounds of ethnic origin, religious denomination or opinion.^[1]

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There is freedom to build churches and raise funds for religious activities from both inside and outside the country. All religious groups have complete freedom to engage in proselytism, including teaching children about religion. Some preachers do so in markets, street junctions and on public buses. Churches are also free to hold religious functions, worship and training. Because of youth gangs called Kulunas, moving at night can be dangerous in Kinshasa and other towns.^[3] In order to avoid the risk of attack from these gangs, the faithful from different denominations may spend the whole night in their churches, until dawn.

In 1977, the government of the then Republic of Zaire signed the Schools Convention with the Catholic, Protestant, Kimbanguist and Islamic communities.^[4] Religion is taught in school and is part of the official curriculum. A number of religious groups run a wide range of institutions like schools, health centres, orphanages and media outlets. Concerning the media, most TV channels and radio stations in Kinshasa belong to different Christian communities.

Incidents

ACN's Religious Freedom in the World 2016 Report noted that the DRC's authorities and the Bishops' National Episcopal Conference of Congo (known by its French acronym CENCO) had been "on a collision course since 2014" over President Kabila's proposal to extend his stay in office beyond the two terms permitted in the constitution. A major political crisis erupted in the second half of 2016 after it became clear that scheduled elections were not going to take place, and President Kabila planned to remain in office beyond December 2016.

CENCO helped broker a last-minute accord between the country's major political actors on 31st December 2016 to bring the country out of political deadlock. Known as the St Sylvester Agreement, it stated that President Kabila would not stand for a third term, or try to change the constitution and that elections would be held before the end of 2017. Under its conditions, President Kabila would remain in office during this transitional period, which the High Court had confirmed six months earlier.^[5] However, a lack of commitment to the accord by President Kabila's camp prompted the bishops to withdraw. This soured relations between the Church and the authorities, prompting the Vatican to cancel a scheduled visit to the DRC by Pope Francis in March 2017. The US State Department's March 2017 report "commend[ed] the tireless efforts of the DRC's Council of CENCO in mediating [the St Sylvester Agreement] initiative". Also, the US "strongly supports a continuing role for CENCO in the process, and seconds CENCO's public appeal for both sides to redouble efforts to overcome points of disagreement."^[6]

Attacks against Church institutions took place in Kasai – a province that has been caught up in a violent conflict since 2016 – as well as in the capital Kinshasa. On 18th February 2017, the former's Major Seminary was looted by armed men allegedly belonging to a local militia, the Kamwina Nsapu. Father Richard Kitenge Muembo, rector of the seminary, said: "They systematically broke all the doors of the priests' rooms and burnt our belongings." The following day, a group of 12 attackers broke into St Dominic's Church, Kinshasa, and destroyed furniture before desecrating the tabernacle. At the same time, people in Kinshasa found anonymous flyers on the streets calling for the "destruction of Catholic churches and schools" as well as religious communities. Following the events the Archbishop of Kinshasa, Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo, issued a statement claiming that "the Catholic Church is intentionally targeted [in order] to torpedo its mission of peace and reconciliation."^[7] He added: "We learned with indignation of the arson attack on a section of the major seminary in Malole [in Kasai Province] by violent thugs, who have [also] sown terror among the Carmelite Sisters."^[8]

One year after the signing of the St Sylvester Accord, the Comité Laïc de Coordination (CLC), DRC's lay coordination committee, called on Catholics to join peaceful demonstrations following Mass on Sunday 31st December 2017 to demand political parties respect the agreement, engage in political dialogue and uphold the constitution.^[9] Security forces responded to the peaceful protests with violence: eight people were killed (seven in Kinshasa and one in Kananga), 92 wounded and 180 arrested. CLC described "violent repression" noting that DRC's authorities did "not hesitate to fire live ammunition at the population... not hesitate to throw tear gas into the churches... constituting a serious violation of the sacred places."

Church leaders also blamed DRC's security forces for attacks over the New Year which took place at 134 churches and chapels in the capital and a number of provinces in the country. The high number of attacks strongly suggests a deliberate tactical mass-attack by President Kabila's government against the Catholic Church's stance against Kabila's attempt to extend his presidency beyond the constitutional remit. On 3rd January 2018, Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo, issued a strong statement to "denounce and condemn the actions of our so-called valiant men in uniform whose actions are tantamount to barbarism". The Apostolic Nuncio also condemned the "disproportionate reaction by the security forces against the peaceful demonstrations",^[10] adding that the CLC "has legal personality within the Catholic Church and can organise initiatives in all the territory of the archdiocese".^[11]

Less than a fortnight later, security forces attacked parishioners holding a procession in the grounds of Kinshasa Cathedral on Friday 12th January. Father Jean Nkongolo asked forces to stop shooting, but as Father Cikongo

described: “[A] policeman shot at him directly towards his eyes with a rubber bullet, but thanks be to God Father Nkongolo reacted quickly and moved his head away from the attack. Otherwise he would have been hit in the eyes, but he was shot on the side of his face.” Father Cikongo said that after the attack Father Nkongolo noticed a woman shot in the head. “We thought at the time that she was dead but she had survived.”^[12] The CLC called for peaceful demonstrations in response to the violence. On Sunday, 21st January 2018, security forces killed six people with 49 wounded and 94 arrested, according to MONUSCO, the UN mission in the country.^[13] On that occasion, pro-democracy rallies took place not only in Kinshasa, but in towns like Goma, Bukavu, Kananga and Mbuji-Mayi. In many cases, churches were surrounded by soldiers since early morning.^[14]

Many witnesses reported that police had closed a number of churches. They used tear gas and live bullets to prevent people coming out of church from joining the protests. In several instances, members of the security forces forcibly stormed Masses, fired inside churches, beat worshippers and forced people out. A Catholic from the St Michel’s parish in Bandalungwa district said: “While we were praying, soldiers and policemen shot their way into the church and scattered us. Many people fell to the ground and some paramedics tried to revive elderly ladies who had fainted, but the priest did not stop the Mass.”^[15]

More than a dozen police officers used tear gas and stun grenades against some 300 churchgoers at another church in the working-class district of Barumbu. The parishioners were observed to wave Bibles and sing religious songs as they tried to march.^[16] On the following day, Cardinal Monsengwo once again challenged the authorities in a strongly worded message: “Are we in an open-air prison? How can [security forces] kill men, women and children and elderly singing religious anthems?... We want the force of the law to reign and not the law of force”. The Cardinal called on Christians to remain firm “without ever yielding to violence”.^[17]

On 10th February 2018, the priests and religious working in the Archdiocese of Kinshasa published a letter addressed to the country’s political authorities in which they denounced the violence used during the protests on 31st December and 21st January. They said: “If you feel the obligation to repress with violence the people’s right to demonstrate, you should also behold that priests have an obligation to denounce these barbaric acts... Still, be sure of this: you have weapons, but victory shall be God’s”.^[18] The letter ended by denouncing the acts of brutality suffered by some priests: “We have witnessed a terror never seen before in this city, including a priest stripped naked in public. Priests are often abused, insulted even in state media, brutalised and abducted during the exercise of their pastoral duties”.^[19]

Around this time, several incidents of intimidation were reported. On 3rd February 2018, police took Father Sebastien Yebo into custody. The authorities picked him up at St Robert’s Church in Kinshasa, as he finished celebrating Mass, and took him to an unknown location. A nun witnessed the assault and abduction. An unidentified man “filmed the priest” on a mobile phone. The religious Sister said: “a police vehicle arrived, the police went down, they started to beat the priest, they threw him into their jeep and left with him.” The following day, Father Yebo was released. He stated that he was questioned about his alleged role in financing the Kamwina Nsapu, the rebel militia operating in Kasai Province.^[20] Reports state that MONUSCO expressed concern in February 2017 over the ongoing conflict “marked by violent atrocities committed by the Kamwina Nsapu militias” in the Kasai region. That same month, the High Commissioner of Human Rights, Mr Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, said: “It is time to stop a brutal military reaction that does nothing to address the root causes of the conflict between the government and local militias, but instead targets civilians on the basis of their alleged links with the militias”.^[21]

The CLC called for a new rally on 25th February 2018 at the end of Sunday Mass. On that occasion, one person was shot dead in Kinshasa and another one in Mbandaka was seriously injured and later died because of his injuries. According to the Congolese Association for Access to Justice, police arrested at least 80 people that day.^[22]

Catholic priests continued to be targeted in a series of kidnappings. On the night of 16th July 2017, Father Pierre Akilimali and Father Charles Kipasa were abducted by armed men in the Parish of Notre-Dame des Anges de Bunyuka, Beni-Butembo Diocese.^[23] As of May 2018, both priests were still missing. Previously in October 2012, three Congolese Assumptionist priests, Fathers Jean-Pierre Ndulani, Anselme Wasikundi and Edmond Bamutut, were abducted in their

parish, Notre-Dame des Pauvres de Mbau, about 20 kilometres from the town of Beni. Their whereabouts remain unknown. After the July kidnappings, Archbishop Utembi Tapa of Kisangani called on armed groups not to confuse the Church's pastoral role with perceived political "interference".

On 22nd January 2018, unidentified gunmen kidnapped Father Robert Masinda and two agronomists Dieudonne Sangala and Augustin Vyunza, and three others from the parish of Bingo parish working for a Church-run training farm. All of them were released by their captors two days later. Some speculated that the kidnappers might have been soldiers seeking a ransom.^[24]

Another priest, Father Célestin Ngango, from the Parish of Karambi, in Goma Diocese, North Kivu district, was abducted on the 1st April 2018, Easter Sunday, in Nyarukwangara, Rutshuru Territory, on his way back to his parish after celebrating Mass. The following day, his captors demanded a US\$ 50,000 ransom.^[25] The priest was one of 10 kidnapped within a week, of which three were killed after ransoms were not paid. After an undisclosed ransom was paid, he was released on 5th April.^[26]

Another priest, Father Etienne Nsengiunva, 38, also from Goma Diocese was assassinated on 8th April. He had just finished celebrating Mass in the outstation of Kyahemba and was having lunch with some of the faithful when a gunman stormed into the house and shot him dead.^[27] The Vicar General of the Diocese of Goma, Father Louis de Gonzague Nzabanita, blames the Mai-Mai Nyatura^[28] for the murder. The latter are a militia that claims they are fighting for the rights of Kinyarwanda-speaking Hutus of North Kivu. The UN Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) noted the attacks in eastern DRC are "fundamentally rooted in competition over land and natural resources, have resulted in cycles of violence committed along ethnic lines".

Prospects for freedom of religion

During the reporting period, there was a very sharp increase in the number of attacks targeting the Catholic Church by the authorities in the DRC. In previous years, attacks against Church institutions and personnel were generally by armed militias and gangs of bandits operating in the country's conflict areas, mainly in the east. While that trend continued, a new front of attacks came from the authorities because of the Church's strong role in promoting democracy and human rights, which are values enshrined in the social teaching of the Church. Given the repeated demonstration of violence point to the present political regime's unwillingness to relinquish power and refusal to accept a smooth transition, it can be concluded that the right to religious freedom is very likely to be further undermined in the near future.

Endnotes / Sources

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