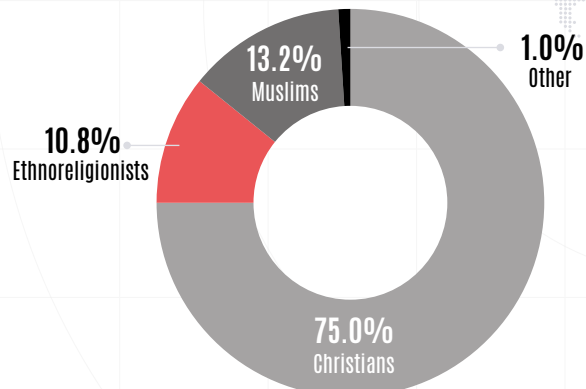




CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Constitution of the Central African Republic (CAR),¹ replacing the “Charte de la Transition”² adopted in 2013, was approved by a referendum on 13th December 2015 and promulgated on 30th March 2016. This fundamental legal text marked an end to the political transition after the country officially stopped the crisis that started with the violent takeover by Seleka rebels in March 2013.³

The Preamble of the new constitution recognises the “ethnic, cultural and religious diversity” of the Central African people, “which contribute[s] to the enrichment of their personality.” Article 10 guarantees “freedom of conscience, of assembly, [and] of religion and of beliefs [...] within the conditions established by the law. Any form of religious fundamentalism [...] and intolerance is prohibited.” Article 24 proclaims that “The Central African Republic is a State of law, unitary, sovereign, indivisible, secular and democratic.”

All religious denominations have the right to broadcast a weekly program on state radio (Radio Centrafrique), and operate their own radio stations. The main confessional radio stations are the Bangui-based Catholic Radio Notre Dame and the Protestant Radio Voix de l'Évangile (formerly Ra-

dio Nehemie). Other Catholic stations are back on the air after the violent Seleka rule. In April 2018, the Interreligious Platform for Peace (led by the Catholic Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, President of CAR's Evangelical Alliance, Pastor Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou, and President of the Central African Islamic Council, Imam Kobine Layama) made plans for an interfaith radio station, but its financial backers failed to agree at the time.⁴

The Central African Republic signed a Framework Agreement with the Holy See on 6th September 2016.⁵ The document establishes a juridical framework for the relations between Church and state in which both sides, while safeguarding their respective autonomy, commit themselves to working together for the common good as well as for the “moral, social, cultural and material well-being” of the country's citizens.⁶ However, according to some high-ranking Catholic prelates, the agreement's full implementation is still waiting, with the government authorities arguing that a document is missing. During their Plenary Assembly in January 2020, the Central African Episcopal Conference (Conférence Episcopale Centrafricaine, CECA) presented a list of priority issues to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including the Framework Agreement, but by mid-2020 no answer had been received.⁷

Religious groups, except for followers of indigenous religions,

are required to register with the Ministry of the Interior, Public Security and Territorial Administration. Such groups must have at least one thousand members and their leaders must have had adequate religious training, to the satisfaction of the Ministry. Registration can be denied on grounds of public morals, public health and/or disturbing social peace. The procedure is free and confers tax benefits, but there are no penalties if a group does not register.⁸

Foreign personnel working with religious organisations can obtain residency permits, while foreign missionaries and school staff working with the local Catholic Church can receive renewable residency permits (*carte de séjour*) valid for one year, a procedure they find more efficient.⁹ New religious groups, particularly Pentecostal or “born-again” Christian Churches have been growing in the country over the last few years, some of them with government support through the use of public buildings for public religious ceremonies.¹⁰

Religious education is not compulsory, but it is available in most schools. The Catholic Church has a network of schools in all the nine dioceses of the country, coordinated by the Associated Central African Catholic Schools (*Écoles Catholiques Associées en Centrafrique, ECAC*), with a memorandum of understanding signed with the Ministry of Education. The state-run University of Bangui has a Catholic chaplaincy next to its campus, run by the Jesuits, with a wide range of pastoral and cultural activities.

The main Christian festivities – Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Assumption of Our Lady, All Saints and Christmas – are public holidays. Since 2017, the Islamic festivities of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Kebir are also public holidays.

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Despite the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic¹¹ negotiated in Khartoum (Sudan), brokered by the African Union and signed in Bangui on 6th February 2019 by the CAR government and 14 armed groups, violence continued to affect large parts of the country during the reporting period.¹²

A description by La Croix International succinctly outlines the historical developments: “Since the overthrow of President François Bozizé in 2013, there have been clashes between numerous armed groups in the Central African Republic. The former president was ousted in a coup orchestrated by the Séléka, a coalition of Muslim armed groups from the north of the country and mercenaries from Chad and Sudan. In

response to the Séléka, self-defense militia consisting of Christians and animists were formed. Known as the Anti-Balaka, these groups attacked the Muslims, giving a religious dimension to the conflict. According to many observers, these armed groups are fighting, above all, for the control of deposits of diamonds, gold and uranium.”¹³

The year 2018 was particularly trying for the Catholic Church, which had five of its priests murdered, all of them in what seemed to be, at least in part, religiously biased attacks. Fr. Joseph Désiré Angbabata, of the Diocese of Bambari, was shot dead on 21st March during an attack against his parish in Seko, where many people had taken refuge, apparently killed by rebels from the Union for Peace in Central Africa (*Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique, UPC*).¹⁴

On 1st May 2018, an armed “self-defence” Muslim militia based in Bangui’s Kilometre Cinq (also known as PK5), a mostly Muslim area, surrounded the compound of Notre Dame de Fatima Catholic Church during Mass and opened fire for more than one hour, killing 30 people and wounding at least 185 worshippers.¹⁵ Fr. Albert Tungumale Baba, a much-respected priest who had worked tirelessly for the reconciliation of Christians and Muslims in the area, was among the dead.¹⁶

On 25th May 2018, a memorandum was published signed by Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga of Bangui, Imam Omar Kobine Layama, leader of the Muslim community and Pastor Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou, president of the Association of Evangelical Churches of the Central African Republic stating that “the crisis that has gripped the country since 2013 is not only due to internal factors but also instigated and exacerbated by external interference.”¹⁷ The three religious leaders declared “that some Central Africans, greedy for easy spoils and for power, ‘are allying themselves with the foreign mercenaries from Chad and Sudan in order to destabilize the Central African Republic.’”¹⁸ “Certain neighbouring countries too ‘have a hidden agenda to destabilize and occupy the country, by means of armed groups supported by them, in order to gain control of our resources.’”¹⁹ Furthermore, they stated “that these groups are using religion in order to create divisions.”²⁰ Finally the three leaders accused “some contingents of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), of ‘conspiring with the armed groups to commit faith-based crimes.’”²¹

On 29th June 2018, the Vicar General of the Diocese of Bambari, Fr. Firmin Gbagoua, was also killed in cold blood by men purportedly associated with the UPC who broke into his res-

idence at night.²² The Central African Bishops' Conference stated: "We strongly call on the government and MINUSCA to coordinate their efforts so that those responsible for these murders will be arrested and brought to justice."²³ Further the Bishops stated: "We urge the entire Christian community to remain calm and in prayer so as not to fall into the trap of those who want to show that Christians and Muslims can no longer live together in order to partition the Central African nation."²⁴

On 31st August 2018, Bishop Nestor-Désiré Nongo-Aziagbia of Bossangoa, in the north-west of the Central African Republic, stated: "Today, 70-80 percent of the country is in the hands of armed rebel groups, so that the majority of the country is no longer under state control."²⁵ The bishop described how the Catholic Church was trying to help stating: "The Church has been at the forefront of the efforts for reconciliation... We give shelter to the refugees and help those who are in need, without regard to their religion."²⁶

On 15th November 2018, UPC rebels along with a Muslim youth militia attacked a camp for Internally Displaced People (IDPs) located in the headquarters of the Catholic Diocese of Alindao, killing 70 civilians. Among those killed were two Catholic priests – Fr. Celestin Ngoumbango and the Vicar General Fr. Blaise Mada – who were shot dead.²⁷

During the raid, the attackers entered the cathedral, shot inside the church building and desecrated the tabernacle in what seemed to be a well-calculated plan to humiliate the Catholic community. In addition, the priests' house, the headquarters of the diocesan Caritas and several other Church buildings were completely burnt down. The Caritas warehouse, used to store emergency food stocks to feed IDPs, was pillaged, leaving the displaced people without any food.²⁸

On 8th April 2019, Bishop Juan José Aguirre Muñoz of Bangassou, insisting that religion was not the sole root of the conflict between Ex-Séléka and Anti-Balaka militant groups, said many militias active in the country were in the pay of foreign powers, notably from the Gulf States.²⁹ Receiving weapons, munitions, vehicles and logistics, the Bishop stated the militia attacks "were aimed at expelling the non-Muslims from the areas [the mercenaries] have conquered, and ultimately they are seeking the partition of the country." "Their aim is to divide up the country and they are helping themselves like pitiless predators to the mineral wealth of the country."³⁰

Since mid-2019 there has been an intermittent spate of apparently politically motivated attacks against the Church on social media. In June 2019, at the end of its Plenary Assem-

bly in Bossangoa, the CECA issued a pastoral letter questioning who was funding an emerging militia known as the "Sharks" (Requins).³¹ In the same message, the bishops also condemned "the anarchic exploitation of the country's natural resources without any positive outcome for the local populations."³² In response, a certain Julien Bela posted a series of messages on Facebook with threats and insults against the Catholic Church, accusing the bishops of being "the devil's advocates" and "extraterrestrials".³³

At the beginning of March 2020, the Archbishop of Bangui, Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, warned against the mismanagement of public funds and spoke out against the lack of public services, which left the population poor.³⁴ This statement attracted an angry response from Didacien Kossimatchi, a high cadre of the ruling party, the Mouvement Coeurs Unis (MCU). In a statement widely circulated in social media, he said the Church had no right to express views on political issues.³⁵ Any criticism of the Catholic Church by the MCU, however, stopped in the second half of 2020.

On 6th September 2020, the Episcopal Conference published a long pastoral letter titled "Fais sortir mon peuple" (Let my people go) in which the bishops called for fair, transparent and peaceful elections (scheduled for the end of 2020). At the same time, they criticised armed groups for not honouring their commitments in the Peace Accord they signed in February 2019. The letter was generally well received, and no one publicly rejected it.³⁶

Fr. Aurelio Gazzera, a much-respected Carmelite priest, was the victim of harassment and threats because of his long-standing involvement in environmental issues. Originally from Italy, he came to the CAR in 1995 and has worked in Bozoum (Diocese of Bouar) for the last 15 years. During the first months of 2019, the clergyman denounced in many fora – including social media – the heavy environmental damage caused to the area where his parish is located by uncontrolled gold mining by a Chinese company since December 2018.³⁷ Fr. Gazzera documented the consequences of mining activities on the local population, such as the loss of safe drinking water and farmland, and the serious risks to human health.

Although the CAR Minister of State of Mines, Energy, and Water Resources tentatively suspended the Chinese company's activities in Bozoum on 25th March 2019, the order was not respected and gold mining continued. In a much-discussed incident, Fr. Gazzera was arrested, and his camera and mobile phone were seized by the security forces on 27th April for taking pictures close to the Ouham River.³⁸ When the police vehicle with the priest arrived in Bozoum, a crowd

gathered around and demanded his release. Under pressure, the officers let him go. After this episode, the prime minister spoke in the National Assembly, accusing Fr. Gazzera of being a gold trafficker.³⁹

On 8th May 2019, Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, Bishop Mirosław Gucwa of Bouar and Fr. Gazzera met with Prime Minister Firmin Ngrebada as well as with the Minister of State of Mines, Energy, and Water Resources, and the Minister of Water, Forestry, Hunting, Fishing, and Environment.⁴⁰ Thereafter, threats and attacks against Fr. Gazzera stopped. His advocacy attracted the interest of the country's MPs, who appointed a commission of inquiry to deal with the issue.

During armed clashes between rival groups in Ndele on 3rd March 2020, the Catholic Bishop of Kaga-Bandoro, Thadeus Kuzy, was harassed and robbed by armed men from one of the ex-Seleka factions. Bishop Kuzy had stopped in Ndele that day because of a car problem. By his own account, he and some of his priests were repeatedly threatened by men wielding guns and knives before he was rescued on 8th March by Pakistani soldiers with the MINUSCA forces⁴¹ stationed at Ndele, and brought to Bambari.⁴²

As tensions and armed clashes continued throughout March and April 2020, Christians in Ndele, both Catholics and Protestants, complained that the Popular Front for the Rebirth of the Central African Republic (FPRC⁴³), a Seleka offshoot rebel group dominated by ethnic Rounga, harassed and threatened them as non-Muslims for allegedly siding with their enemies, the Gula people. According to witnesses, unidentified armed men set fire to two churches that belonged to the Apostolic Church (Église Apostolique) in Ndele's Sara and Gozamar II neighbourhoods at around 4 a.m. on 1st April 2020.⁴⁴

Members of the Muslim community also reported attacks by reportedly Anti-Balaka or self-defence militias in different parts of the country. However, in many cases, the victims were ethnic Fulani pastoralists targeted, perhaps, more for their cattle herding activities than for their religious affiliation.

Muslims continued reporting cases of routine discrimination, particularly when requesting government services such as for certificates of nationality, which are needed in order to apply for a passport. There were also complaints of discriminatory behaviour towards Muslims at police and gendarmerie checkpoints, with individuals with Islamic names more likely to be harassed or be asked to pay bribes than people with Christian names.

On a more positive note, the number of Muslim government officials, including ministers and members of the offices of the

president and the prime minister, increased progressively, particularly after the signing of the peace accord in February 2016.

On 9th July 2018, the so-called Church Defence League (Ligue de Defense de l'Église) issued a press release signed by Nzapayeke Francois, pledging "to avenge the murders of many Church dignitaries and men of God killed performing their function."⁴⁵ The statement also threatened Muslims that they would have "to practise their faith in a state of doubt and permanent fear as it is the case with Christians."⁴⁶ The Episcopal Conference reacted with a statement issued on 10th July 2018, signed by Cardinal Nzapalainga, in which the bishops categorically condemned the Ligue's message.⁴⁷ In the same communications the Bishops reminded the faithful "to be vigilant so that they do not give in to hatred and confessional manipulations aimed at destabilizing the country, recalling that the crisis in the Central African Republic is not confessional but political."⁴⁸

During the period under review, several thousand Muslims displaced in 2014 were able to return home, particularly in towns in the southern and western regions of the country. In Bossangoa, Muslims were able to visit their old properties, many of them destroyed, and do some trading, but were not yet able to resettle or rebuild their mosques.

There was some improvement in Bangui at the beginning of 2020, after almost all the mosques outside of the Kilometre Cinq area were destroyed in early 2014. The largest of these mosques, in Lakouanga, was rebuilt and attracts regularly many worshippers. In other locations where mosques had been destroyed after 2014, the Christian population is still reluctant to allow the rebuilding of Islamic places of worship.⁴⁹

In December 2020, armed groups re-appeared as the general elections approached. They mounted roadblocks and entered the villages to rob food, terrorizing the population. There were, however, no mortal victims to deplore, and the tensions subsided by the end of February 2021 with the sudden departure of the armed men from the villages.⁵⁰ A "Coalition of Patriots for Change" was announced on 21st February 2021 to challenge the electoral victory of President Touadera, declaring "war" on the government, and was active at the time of writing.⁵¹

Following the worldwide outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, detected in the CAR on 13th March 2020, the government swiftly put in place control measures with the full cooperation of the Church. Schools and places of worship were shut for 30 days, markets and supermarkets were partially closed,

and a nationwide curfew was imposed from 8 pm to 5 am. The authorities and Catholic leaders worked together to control the pandemic with the Catholic Church quick to communicate messages from the Episcopal Conference and Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga.⁵²

Restrictions were eased in June but masks remained compulsory. However, few followed this requirement. The Catholic Church reopened its places of worship enforcing safety measures like social distancing, wearing masks and hand washing.⁵³

The response in the Islamic community was more varied.⁵⁴ The early stages of the pandemic coincided with Ramadan (24th April-23rd May). Some imams kept mosques open in Kilometre Cinq despite risks of contagion and requests from the Health minister that they be closed. Elsewhere, in Lakouanga and Ngaragba, local imams decided to respect the lockdown and held prayers associated with the holy month at

home. Some mosques were reportedly forced to open yielding to veiled threats from armed elements of ex-self-defence groups.

PROSPECTS FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION

During the period under review, armed groups again attacked Christian churches, and also began targeting Christian religious leaders, particularly members of the Catholic clergy. Muslims too faced problems. While they saw some progress in the capital and in western and central parts of the country, they are still far from enjoying full rights to religious freedom. Overall, the prospects to the right of religious freedom remain uncertain; likely to continue to confront considerable challenges due to attacks by extremist militias and the political instability.

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