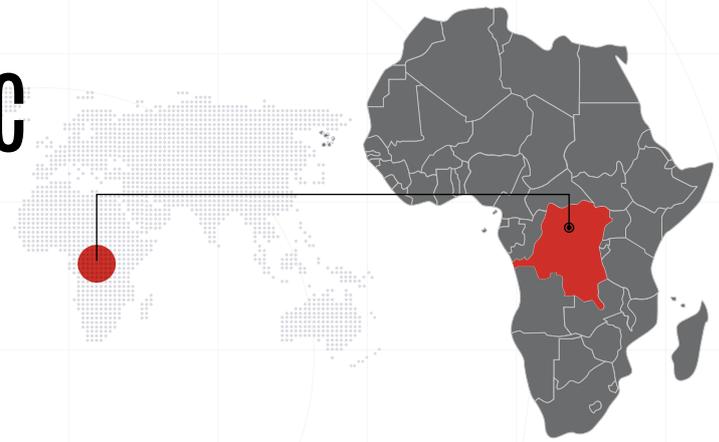
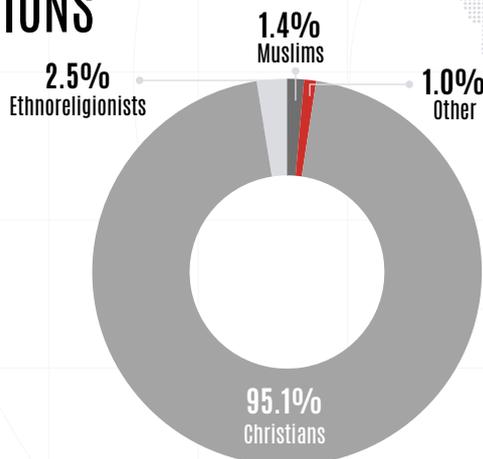




DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) of 2006 upholds the secular character of the state and proclaims respect for religious pluralism. The constitution forbids all forms of discrimination on grounds of ethnic origin, religion or opinion (Article 13), and it states that all persons in the country have the right to freely manifest their religion in public and in private (Article 22).¹ There is freedom to build churches and raise funds for religious activities from both inside and outside the country. All religious groups have the freedom to proselytise, including teaching children about religion. Some preachers do so in markets, street junctions and on public buses.

Religion is taught in school and is part of the official curriculum. Article 45 of the constitution states that “national education establishments shall assure, in cooperation with the religious authorities, to their minor pupils, and having parents demanding it, an education conforming to their religious convictions.”²

In 1977, the DRC (then called the Republic of Zaire) signed the Schools Convention with the Catholic, Prot-

estant, Kimbanguist and Islamic communities.³ In 2016 it signed a framework agreement with the Holy See regarding matters of common interest, including “the institutions of Catholic education, the teaching of religion in schools, welfare and charitable activities of the Church, pastoral care in the armed forces, prison and hospital institutions, as well as property tax, the obtaining of entry visas and residence permits for religious personnel”.⁴

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 AND DEVELOPMENTS

2018 was highlighted by a run up to the long awaited general election. The vote had been postponed several times, and occurred two years after the legally required date. The Christian community, in particular the National Episcopal Conference of the DRC (Conférence épiscopale nationale du Congo, CENCO), has been a strong advocate of free and fair elections in the country. In July 2018, the Lay Coordination Committee (which has strong links with

the Catholic Church) called for “actions of protest” if free and credible elections were not guaranteed.⁵ In October 2018, the Catholic Church called on politicians not use the image of the Pope for electoral purposes, after one candidate, Emmanuel Ramazani, used it.⁶ Finally on 30th December 2018, the DRC held a general election and Felix Tshisekedi defeated incumbent President Joseph Kabila. However, the Church, which had sent 40,000 electoral observers to polling stations,⁷ questioned the election results and claimed that the real winner had been the runner-up, Martin Fayulu.⁸ A number of demonstrations took place around the country with several persons killed⁹ as protesters demanded a true accounting of the results.

During the period under review, violence against the Christian community continued, especially in the eastern region of Kivu. Various non-state armed militias were the main perpetrators, whereas in previous years the DRC security forces carried out most anti-Christian attacks.¹⁰ This was because Christians, in particular the Episcopal Conference, were highly critical of the former Kabila government.

On 25th September 2018, just three months before the elections, an armed attack took place in Beni, a city in North Kivu. A local pastor identified at least 27 members of local Churches who were killed.¹¹ The attack was allegedly perpetrated by an Islamist militia, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).

Clergymen have often been the target of this Islamist armed group. In November 2018, terrorists conducted another attack near Beni. Armed men entered the house of a pastor and killed him and his daughter. In the assault three other children were also killed, and seven Christians were taken and are still missing.¹² According to a witness, the attackers claimed that the area where the militia operates belonged to Muslims and not Christians, and that “every Christian found in it is an enemy” to them.¹³ The day after, the ADF carried out a further attack in a nearby village, kidnapping a pastor and five members of his congregation and setting 12 houses alight.¹⁴ The pastor and his wife were later found dead.

In December 2018, 900 civilians were massacred in Mai-Ndombe province in intercommunal clashes between ethnic Banunu and Batendé, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Houses and public buildings such as schools and clinics were looted or set on fire.¹⁵

Another attack by the ADF against a Christian community was reported in March 2019 in the village of Kalau. The

armed rebels “fired indiscriminately at villagers,” killing six Christians and forcing hundreds to flee.¹⁶ A local community leader said the following about the Islamist militia: “they worked for long in the domains of kidnapping and killings, but now they want to move to the stage of occupying the territory. They want to occupy the area they claim as theirs.”¹⁷

The presence of international armed groups in the DRC is not new. However, for the first time, the Islamic State (IS) group claimed an attack on the 18th April 2019 near the town of Beni. IS declared the region as the “Central Africa Province” of the “Caliphate”.¹⁸ Two Congolese soldiers and one civilian died as a result of the attack.

According to Open Doors, North Kivu province saw more than 20 attacks on Christian villages from January to May 2019, with approximately 90 people killed, 12,000 displaced, and at least 31 kidnapped. Moreover, the Christian advocacy group reported that “at least six churches have been burned down and two church-run clinics and health centres have been destroyed”.¹⁹

In May 2019, the Episcopal Conference and the Église du Christ au Congo presented a petition calling for local elections to take place before the end of 2019, since the electoral schedule had not been respected as required by the constitution.²⁰

A Catholic priest from the parish of Sembé was kidnapped at the end of June; his body was found a month later. The circumstances of his death remain unclear.²¹

In June 2019, the Provincial Episcopal Assembly of Bukavu issued a statement in which it denounced the lack of security in the area and called on the authorities to protect the people and the country’s natural resources.²²

In order to counter the growing activity of militias in the eastern areas of the country, the government launched a large-scale military operation on the 31st October 2019.²³ Its goal was the eradication of “all domestic and foreign armed groups that plague the east of the country and destabilise the Great Lakes region”.²⁴ To this end, the DRC government deployed 21,000 soldiers near the town of Beni at the start of the month.²⁵

In November and December 2019, more than a hundred people were killed by the ADF in the North Kivu province.²⁶

In November 2019, demonstrators attacked the headquarters of MONUSCO in Beni,²⁷ the United Nations mission in the DRC, following fresh massacres by rebel militias. They

accused the peacekeepers of not protecting civilians and some called for their withdrawal.²⁸ The Episcopal Conference deplored the insecurity in the east of the country. In a message to Agenzia Fides, the Bishops proposed “an ‘emergency program’ to put an end to hostilities,” and restore the state authority and provide humanitarian aid.²⁹

In December 2019, the ADF killed at least 20 people in North Kivu. The Archbishop of Kinshasa visited the area and called on the population to cooperate with the police, the army and MONUSCO in order to end the massacres.³⁰ That same month lay Catholics organised a three-day demonstration drawing thousands of people to protest against corruption and demand an end to violence in the east of the country.³¹ The Bishops of North and South Kivu suspended all church activities for a day in order to protest against the violence in the two provinces.³²

In January 2020, the Platform of Religious Confessions of the DRC released a statement in which it acknowledged that some progress had been achieved since the elections, but it noted that the country still faced many challenges such as corruption, insecurity and a deteriorating economy.³³ In the same month, the Standing Committee of the Association of Central African Bishops’ Conferences (Association des Conférences Episcopales de l’Afrique Centrale) released a communiqué calling on the region’s political leaders to protect the population from armed violence, and deplored the loss of trust in each other.³⁴

In February 2020, 40 civilians were killed by the ADF in North Kivu. When one of the ADF members was arrested by the police, the gang attacked the police station where he was held and freed him.³⁵

In March 2020, a priest was severely injured by an armed group in Ituri after a group of men attacked him and two other people with machetes.³⁶

During the last week of May 2020, Islamist terrorists killed 49 civilians and kidnapped 45 in several attacks in North Kivu. They also looted shops and set fire to houses.³⁷

In July 2020, the National Episcopal Conference of the DRC criticised a government bill to reform the judiciary, since it could weaken its independence, and the Independent National Electoral Commission.³⁸ The Lay Coordination Committee also objected to the appointment of Ronsard Malonda as head of the Commission. Protests were held throughout the country.³⁹

In July 2020, the Archbishop of Kinshasa spoke out against the exploitation of the DRC’s natural resources by

foreign companies and the country’s lack of democratic governance.⁴⁰

In July 2020, 2018 Nobel Peace Laureate, Dr. Denis Mukwege spoke out against a series of massacres, the most recent that month in Kipupu, and other human rights violations in eastern DRC, “where crimes under international law have been committed for decades”.⁴¹ The gynaecologist and Pentecostal pastor is world renowned for his care of sexual assault survivors in DRC’s Panzi Hospital near Bukavu.⁴² Threats against his life, delivered largely over social media “from sources both within the DRC and neighbouring Rwanda”⁴³, prompted the UN to provide security, and Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi to demand an investigation into the threats.⁴⁴

In September 2020, Fr. Christian Muta complained that an appeal by the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, echoed by Pope Francis, for a global ceasefire had been almost ignored in the country. He stated: “Congo is experiencing a profound social crisis, poverty and precariousness: at the origin of these problems, there is the interest of a minority in having all the wealth of the country. Not even the coronavirus pandemic has managed to pacify the warring parties because there are interests for which human life seems to be worth little.”⁴⁵

In October 2020, the Bishops of the DRC denounced “the stalemate in the country due to the political crisis and its consequences”, as well as the corruption and criminal organisations involved in the mining sector. They also said that the security situation was disastrous and that the coronavirus crisis had exacerbated the poverty of the population.⁴⁶

In a 19th November interview titled, “DRC’s minerals are stained with Congolese blood”,⁴⁷ Dr. Mukwege called again on the international community for a solution to the rampaging violence shrouding the exploitation and plunder of minerals used in technologies world-wide such as cobalt, coltan and lithium. In the interview he decried the international state and non-state complicity saying: “we observe activities of looting of these natural resources. And those who command them have powerful supporters outside the country, which stifle voices trying to rise up to demand peace, for the looting is taking place in utter chaos. And without this chaos, the looting is not possible. Today the greatest obstacle comes from those who profit from this war, those who buy the minerals from the armed bandits.”⁴⁸ In the same article he called on the Catholic Church inviting that she “play her prophetic role and make

the world aware of this suffering, that she be our spokesperson, the voice of the voiceless so that finally a tribunal may be installed, allowing the population in the east of the country to live in peace. Because without justice there can be no peace.”⁴⁹

Throughout the reporting period, another important issue affecting religious communities in the country was the Ebola virus. The epidemic has been ongoing since August 2018 and in July 2019 a “public health emergency of international concern” was officially declared by the World Health Organisation.⁵⁰ In eastern DRC, the Church is involved in the fight against the disease through Caritas.⁵¹ However, the security situation in many areas of the country is making the response to the virus more difficult; for example, it is hard to conduct safe and dignified burials⁵².

Due to the high levels of Ebola-related mortality, Church leaders took steps to prevent its spread at religious events. After several priests and members of local parishes caught the virus as a result of religious activities, the Coadjutor Archbishop Fridolin Ambongo of Kinshasa announced in May 2018 that sacraments like baptism, confirmation, anointing of the sick and holy orders, which involve physical contact, would be suspended temporarily in several north-eastern parts of the country.⁵³ In the case of communion, mouth contact would be avoided, while worshippers can perform the sign of peace verbally during Mass celebrations.⁵⁴

The Muslim community has also been affected by Ebola. Saudi Arabia, for example, temporarily suspended issuing hajj visas for DRC pilgrims on 26th July 2019.⁵⁵ This affected Congolese Muslims who wanted to go on the hajj pilgrimage to Makkah, one of the five pillars of Islam.

The first cases of coronavirus were reported in March 2020. As a measure to contain the virus, the authorities declared a state of emergency, which included the closure of churches.⁵⁶ In March 2020, Archbishop Ambongo of Kinshasa criticised the government for postponing the total lockdown that was supposed to be implemented at the end of the month. He also called on authorities to ensure that the population had enough food as well as water and electricity when measures were implemented.⁵⁷

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is facing serious challenges due to poverty, corruption, the weakness of

state structures, high levels of insecurity, and the outbreaks of the Ebola and coronavirus pandemics. Despite the presence of the military and the UN peacekeeping mission, armed groups in the east of the country continue to indiscriminately and brutally terrorise the population predominantly for mineral exploitation interests. Christian faithful, pastors and priests were also specifically targeted particularly by militias affiliated with Islamist organisations. The recent arrival of the Islamic State group in DRC further complicates the situation in a region already troubled by radical extremism. This lack of security in turn thwarts an effective fight against diseases and the delivery of humanitarian aid to a population in need.

The mixture of these profound tribulations is hampered again by local and national governance challenges, undermined by a perceived lack of legitimacy of President Tshisekedi’s election, which was marred by serious allegations of fraud.⁵⁸ The prospect for the future of religious freedom in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is negative.

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