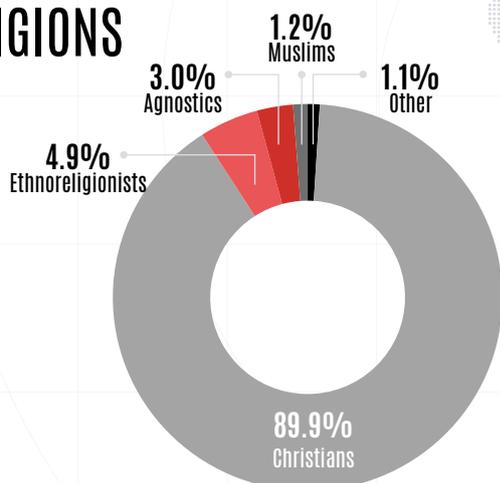




# REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Republic of Congo adopted a new constitution<sup>1</sup> on 6th November 2015. Article 1 sets out the secular character of the state. Under Article 15, all kinds of discrimination, including on religious grounds, are forbidden. Article 24 guarantees freedom of conscience and freedom of belief. The same article states that “the use of religion for political ends is prohibited” and that “religious, philosophical, political and sectarian fanaticism are prohibited and punished by the law.”

All religious groups must register and receive approval from the government.<sup>2</sup> There were no reports of discrimination against religious groups that applied to register, although there have been some complaints that the process is time-consuming. Failure to register may result in a fine, the group’s property being confiscated, its contracts with third parties cancelled, and its foreign staff deported.<sup>3</sup>

The Republic of Congo has a steadily growing Muslim minority, many of them migrant workers from West African countries. Since 2014, there has also been a steady influx of several thousand Muslim refugees from Central African Republic.<sup>4</sup>

The full-face Islamic veil (niqab and the burqa) has been banned from public places, ostensibly to guard against ter-

rorist acts. Foreign Muslims are not allowed to stay overnight in mosques.<sup>5</sup>

Public schools do not include religious education as a subject in their curricula, however, private schools are free to provide religious instruction.<sup>6</sup>

The government often allows the use of public buildings for both Christian and Muslim religious ceremonies. For instance, in August 2017, an Evangelical church held a convention at the Alphonse-Massamba-Débat Stadium in Brazzaville.<sup>7</sup>

During the reporting period, a bilateral agreement between the government of Congo and the Holy See (signed in February 2017) entered into force on 2nd July 2019.<sup>8</sup> This agreement regulates the relations between the Church and the state, and “guarantees to the Church the possibility of carrying out her mission in Congo.”<sup>9</sup> In the agreement, the “legal personality of the Church and her institutions is recognised”. Both parties also commit to cooperate “for the promotion of the common good”. The accord also guarantees “the Church’s right to operate freely in the Central African nation,”<sup>10</sup> and offers better legal protection to Church activities and assets (schools, hospitals, religious sites, etc.) in the country.

The following religious festivals are public holidays: Easter Monday, Ascension, Pentecost, All Saints and Christmas.

Muslim religious festivals are not national holidays, but Muslims are given leave to celebrate their main festivals, such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Kebir.

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Pool, a department (district) in south-eastern Congo, is an area of the country where security and religious freedom have suffered extensively from fighting between the government and a semi-religious group, the so-called Ninja militia. This group was headed by Frédéric Bintsamou, a Protestant clergyman who went by the name of Pastor Ntumi (or Ntoumi), leader of the Neo-Pentecostal Church of Prophet Isaiah.<sup>11</sup> The war lasted on and off for almost two decades (1999-2003 and 2016-2017), ending in December 2017 with a ceasefire and peace agreement.<sup>12</sup> The agreement included an end to hostilities, the resettlement of people displaced by the conflict, and the complete disarmament of the Ninja militia. So far, the peace agreement has been implemented successfully. In August 2018, procedures to disarm and demobilise the rebel group started.

At the end of June 2019, a priest from the parish of Sembé was kidnapped at night in Ouessou, where he had gone for an ordination. His body was found on 5th July 2019. There is no information about the circumstances of his death.<sup>13</sup>

During the period under review, there were no reports of religiously motivated incidents, or actions directed against any community because of their religious affiliation. Generally, religious groups were free to worship publicly and engage in other activities without any hindrance.

On 31st March 2020 all of the country's places of worship were closed as a measure to avoid the spread of the coronavirus.<sup>14</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The Republic of Congo guarantees and is committed to protecting the right to religious freedom. Although frictions between Christians, Pentecostals and the growing Muslim minority are sometimes reported,<sup>15</sup> so far everything indicates that these tensions have been managed without any serious incidents. The peace process that started in 2017, and the relative calm and effective disarmament and demobilisation of the semi-religious Ninja militia, gives credence to this commitment.

Poverty, corruption and the lack of economic opportunities, however, are likely to persist increasing the potential for social unrest and the subsequent challenges for human rights. Despite this, respect for religious freedom, including that of religious minorities, is anticipated to continue.

## SOURCES / ENDNOTES

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