

# **CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The interim constitution, known as the Transitional National Charter, and the new constitution adopted in December provide for freedom of religion and equal protection under the law regardless of religion. They prohibit all forms of religious intolerance and “religious fundamentalism.” Transitional government officials exercised limited control or influence in most of the country and police and gendarmerie failed to stop or punish abuses committed by militias, including abductions, physical abuse, and gender based violence.

During the year, there were significant and widespread incidents of violence between Muslim and Christian citizens, mainly perpetrated by members of competing armed groups, including the mostly Christian anti-Balaka forces and the predominantly Muslim ex-Seleka forces. One major incident occurred in September following the killing by unknown assailants of a Muslim motorcycle taxi driver. At least 41 civilians died in Bangui during the ensuing interreligious violence, which displaced over 40,000 people according to a UN report. Violent sectarian conflicts also occurred outside Bangui, including reports of killings, beatings, kidnappings, forced conversions to Christianity, destruction of mosques and churches, and house burnings. The predominantly Muslim PK5 district of Bangui was surrounded and cut off from the rest of the city by anti-Balaka forces for two months; the siege ended when Pope Francis visited the Central Mosque in PK5 on November 30.

The first U.S. Ambassador accredited to the country since 2012 arrived in October, and raised concerns about religious freedom with the government and in meetings with leaders of religious groups. During a visit to Bangui in March, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations engaged with religious leaders and visited the Muslim PK5 community and discussed religious tolerance in meetings with government officials, NGOs, and religious groups.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.4 million (July 2015 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, while 5.5 percent have no religious beliefs. The nongovernmental

## CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

organizations (NGOs) Oxfam and Coef5 have estimated 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, 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.” 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.

The new constitution takes effect in March 2016, when the newly-elected government comes into power.

Religious groups, except for indigenous religious groups, are required to register with the Ministry of 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 limited 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.

#### **Government Practices**

Civilian authorities did not maintain effective control over the security forces. The government was considered by many observers to be Christian-leaning, despite a Muslim prime minister in office. The government did not take steps to investigate and prosecute officials who committed violations, whether in the security forces or

## CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

elsewhere in the government, creating a climate of impunity. According to Marie-Therese Keita Bocoum, the UN Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in the Central African Republic, “victims are reluctant to file complaints with police in situations where complainants are not of the same religious or ethnic group as the law enforcement personnel.” The expert also reported cases in which national security forces were “reportedly reluctant to take action against human rights violators, particularly when the latter were anti-Balaka.”

Many of the actions affecting religious freedom were committed by armed groups operating more or less freely in certain areas of the country or resulted from shortcomings on the part of the state, which 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. Police and gendarmerie failed to stop or punish abuses committed by the ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka militias, including abductions, torture, and gender based violence.

According to the July UN Report of the Independent Expert, people accused of practicing witchcraft were detained, tortured, or killed by individual members of armed forces. Women, the elderly, children, people with disabilities, and persons with albinism were often accused of practicing witchcraft. The report stated that these persons were also reportedly victims of mob justice, often carried out by anti-Balaka due to the lack of state authority.

In a November 2 speech addressing the October violence in Bangui, President Catherine Samba-Panza offered condolences to all victims of the violence, but singled out the “well-known extremists of KM5,” the primarily Muslim community in Bangui, as engaging in reprisal attacks following the October 26 assassination of two ex-Seleka leaders. She did not explicitly name the Muslim population as either victims or perpetrators of the violence. The G8 (the Group of Eight) ambassadors and NGO representatives in country raised concerns about the tone of this statement during a meeting with President Samba-Panza, and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General stated the remarks were inflammatory. The president stated her intent was to avoid stigmatization of the Muslim population.

## CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Christian and Muslim leaders stated that the government did not consult with existing religious groups before it granted accreditation to new groups. According to these religious leaders, this diminished their capacity to unify their communities or have a unified voice.

Muslims reported they suffered 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. 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 that exceeded those charged to Christians.

The transitional government and international partners such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central Africa Republic (MINUSCA) organized grassroots consultations from January 21 to March 8 in the country and in refugee camps in neighboring countries, including Chad, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The consultations, held in accordance with the July 2014 Brazzaville Accords which called for a ceasefire between anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka forces, formed the basis for the May 4-11 Bangui National Forum. Working groups at the Bangui Forum drafted recommendations in several domains, including justice and reconciliation, and peace and security. According to a government-issued synthesis, participants in the consultations stated religious reconciliation was possible.

The Peace and Security Working Group of the Bangui Forum recommended the expansion and institutionalization of a religious leaders' council. It also called for the reconstruction of and respect for places of worship. The Justice and Reconciliation Working Group, also part of the Bangui Forum, called for a formal process to recognize Ramadan and Eid al-Adha as legal holidays. The government subsequently declared September 24, Eid al-Adha, a national holiday.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Violent conflict and instability in the country had a religious cast, according to most observers. 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 controlled the western part of the country. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was

## CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Many religious leaders stated they did not believe there was a religious conflict in the country.

According to local press reports, on August 20, alleged anti-Balaka forces killed a 19-year-old Muslim youth, triggering reprisal attacks by young Muslims and ex-Seleka rebels inside the Christian neighborhood of Bambari. At least 10 persons were killed and others injured. Many residents fled, increasing the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) by more than 3,000, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Youth from the Muslim and Christian communities erected barricades to protect themselves from gunfire, and the transitional government sent two ministers to calm tensions.

On September 26, a Muslim motorcycle taxi driver in Bangui was beheaded by unknown attackers and his body was dumped in front of a mosque. According to the MINUSCA report entitled *Violations and Abuses of International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law committed in Bangui, Central African Republic, between 26 September and 20 October 2015*, at least 41 civilians died in Bangui during the ensuing interreligious violence and more than 40,000 people were displaced. In response to the violence, anti-Balaka forces surrounded PK5 with blockades, trapping the residents inside. MINUSCA forces launched an operation on November 16 to break the blockades, but free movement was not restored until MINUSCA and French military forces attached to Operation Sangaris forced open the routes for the visit of Pope Francis to the Central Mosque in PK5 on November 30. After the pope's visit, armed groups did not re-establish the barricades that had cut off PK5 from the rest of Bangui.

Anti-Balaka forces reportedly killed a Muslim youth on October 17 in Bangui's Third District, where the PK5 Muslim enclave is located. He was reportedly part of a self-defense group.

According to the July UN report of the independent expert, elderly and children, especially in Bouar, were accused of witchcraft and were tortured and killed by anti-Balaka fighters.

In April anti-Balaka elements reportedly buried alive four women accused of practicing witchcraft in Zaorossoungu, Mambere-Kadi Province. On June 10, local residents beat to death a man accused of witchcraft.

## CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Two Muslim members of the ex-Seleka Union for Peace in Central Africa were kidnapped and killed on October 26 in Bangui while on a mission to meet with President Samba-Panza. The killings were followed by a new round of sectarian violence, including the killing of three young Christians in the Second District of Bangui on October 27. The same day, the archbishop of Bangui and a Vatican delegation reported being harassed when trying to enter PK5. According to one pastor, church attendance in Bangui dropped from 1,000 to 200 at this time due to the lack of security.

On November 9, suspected anti-Balaka militants attacked two trucks carrying Muslim passengers between Kuango and Bambari. The militants killed two Muslims, injured three, and kidnapped five children. On November 10, anti-Balaka forces killed two Muslims in an IDP camp in Batangafo. Ex-Seleka forces then attacked a nearby IDP camp, burning down 500 huts and displacing 31,000 IDPs.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported cases of sexual violence during the sectarian violence in Bangui. At the M'poko displacement camp, mostly run by members of the anti-Balaka militia, nine cases of sexual violence were reported to HRW. The victims reported that they were raped by the anti-Balaka because they were buying from or selling to Muslims in a Muslim neighborhood in Bangui. One victim quoted an anti-Balaka as stating, "You are going to market to sell vegetables to the Muslims so they can have the strength to come and kill us."

According to HRW, on November 15, a woman was raped by six armed Muslim men she identified as members of a Muslim self-defense group. The victim was on her way to the Ramandji market and was approached by the six men and asked about her husband. She replied that her husband was dead, and the attacker stated "oh, she is married to an anti-Balaka, we can take her."

HRW reported since September 26, anti-Balaka groups kidnapped between six and 18 women and girls and took them hostage for anti-Balaka leader Emar Nganafei. The hostages were only released once their families paid a ransom. One victim reported that Nganafei told her "there is no order, we make the law. If your family does not pay, we will kill you."

According to the UN report of the independent expert, on March 11, ex-Seleka fighters accused two men of having ties with the anti-Balaka forces and were illegally detained and subjected to cruel treatment.

## CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

On October 29, approximately 30 armed Muslims from the PK5 community entered the primarily Christian Fatima district, stating the intent to burn down Fatima Church. MINUSCA forces pushed the group back. It was reported that two Muslims were killed, 16 people were injured, and two homes were burned down. The government estimated that more than 100 homes were burned throughout the year.

On November 4, MINUSCA reported that “presumed anti-Balaka” attacked a commercial convoy of Muslim traders departing Bangui after reports spread that MINUSCA was using it to evacuate foreign Muslims out of Bangui. Among those wounded were two peacekeepers and one civilian.

There was violence during the constitutional referendum in December reportedly due to efforts by anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka leaders who sought to prevent voting in some areas of the country, including Ouham, Bamingui-Bangoran, Haute Kotto, and Nana-Gribizi.

According to a report released by Amnesty International in July, since 2014 there were “dozens” of Muslims in at least five towns and villages forcibly converted to Christianity or put under “intense pressure to convert,” including the threat of death, by anti-Balaka militias. Muslims in Bania reported to Amnesty International in May that the situation had “improved somewhat,” but they still faced sporadic threats from anti-Balaka militias coming from other villages, and that several of those converted remained Christian for reasons of security.

According to a foreign official, 417 of the country’s 436 mosques had been destroyed during interreligious clashes over the past several years. According to Amnesty International, a mosque in Zorosongou was destroyed by anti-Balaka forces in April. Amnesty International stated the Muslim community had fled the town in 2014 and the mosque attack was meant to “send a signal to dissuade” Muslims from returning.

In October HRW reported the destruction of two churches and a mosque in the neighborhoods near PK5 between September 26 and October 1.

According to news reports, during the violence in September, the home of Reverend Nicolas Guerekoyame Gbangou, Chairman of the country’s Association

## CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

of Evangelicals, was looted and burned down. News reports also stated that at the same time anti-Balaka forces broke into hospitals looking for Muslims.

The Catholic archbishop of Bangui, local priests, and an imam worked with communities to defuse tensions by making radio broadcasts urging members of their religious communities to call for tolerance and restraint. Local leaders, including the bishop of Bossangoa and internationally based academics, warned against casting the conflict in religious terms and thus fueling its escalation along religious lines.

Hate speech and negative comments about or directed toward Muslims was common in the media. Private media outlets reportedly continued to be heavily influenced by their financiers, generally representing a Christian perspective, and led by Christian editors. Print media tended to blame Muslim communities for the violence that took place in September. Muslims in PK5 reported that private news outlets refused to answer their phone calls or report on conditions for Muslims. By November several outlets carried individual stories and used more neutral language concerning the Muslim population. One outlet, *Centrafric Matin*, contained almost daily columns encouraging tolerance toward the Muslim population.

Muslims reported facing consistent social discrimination, including feeling “marginalized” by their 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. Muslims also expressed a general discomfort in wearing traditional dress outside of their enclave, stating it drew negative attention or comments from non-Muslims.

In several locations, Muslim IDPs and refugees who had been displaced in early 2014 had not returned to their homes. In Bossemptele, only 20 out of a preconflict population of 4,000 Muslims lived in the town as of August 18. As of September 2, there was no Muslim community in Bossangoa, which once was home to 27,000 Muslims. None of the Muslims who fled Sibut and Damara, which had formerly been the home of several thousand, had reportedly returned, and only a handful of Muslims who had never left, remained. Amnesty International reported more than 30,000 Muslims remained within seven identified enclaves throughout the western part of the country, including in Bangui, Boda, Yaloke, Carnot, Berberati, Bouar and Dekoa. According to Amnesty International, many towns and villages that were previously home to substantial Muslim communities were now empty of their Muslim inhabitants or had fewer than 500 remaining Muslims.

## CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

During the pope's visit in November there was a peaceful march of Christians and Muslims in the Fatima neighborhood. The pope was escorted by a Muslim youth from the Central Mosque to the stadium in Bangui where he said Mass to 30,000 citizens. Religious leaders said that the pope's visit helped restore a significant degree of trust between religious communities. They also said that the pope's visit led to the dismantling of some of the physical barricades that had previously divided Muslim and Christian neighborhoods.

Bangui's Lakouanga Mosque, destroyed by Christians in May 2014, reopened on May 1 with the assistance of members of the Christian community.

The Muslim Religion Organization (L'Organisation du Culte Musulmans) oversaw the great majority of the country's mosques. Only five mosques, including Bangui's Grand Mosque, did not cooperate with the body. Several other Muslim organizations, including the Commission for the Muslims of Central Africa and the Islamic Community of Central Africa, attempted to organize the Muslim community.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The first U.S. Ambassador accredited to the country since 2012 arrived in October, and raised concerns about religious freedom with the government and in meetings with leaders of religious groups.

During a visit from March 10-12, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations held meetings with government officials, NGOs, and religious groups and discussed religious tolerance. She also visited the Muslim PK5 community in Bangui.

During a December visit to Bangui, a U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State met with Muslim and Christian leaders to discuss challenges their communities faced and the immediate effects of the pope's visit.

In November the embassy hosted a conference on the role of women in conflict, intended to cross religious boundaries and build bridges between faith communities in Bangui. When Muslim leaders declined to participate, stating they were unable to leave the PK5 neighborhood due to security concerns, the Ambassador, accompanied by the national minister of reconciliation, visited the neighborhood to hear the concerns of the community directly. Following the visit,

## **CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC**

the minister of reconciliation drafted and distributed a report to all of the ministers of the cabinet, who reported they were unaware of the situation of the Muslim population in PK5. The Ambassador also worked to have media outlets restart coverage of events in PK5.

The Ambassador met with the Muslim community in Berberati, a city known as being one of the main anti-Balaka centers. Although the Ambassador declined to meet with anti-Balaka rebel leaders, he visited a mosque that had been destroyed by the anti-Balaka.

On June 11, the U.S. Charge d’Affaires hosted an event that brought together representatives of the ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka forces, joined by a representative from a high-level interfaith peace movement, to promote peace and reconciliation among individuals of different faiths.