



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# COUNTRY UPDATE: CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

June 2021

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### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

## Religious Freedom Conditions in CAR

*By Madeline Velturo, Policy Analyst*

### Summary and Recommendations

In 2020, Central African Republic (CAR) saw some modest progress on protecting religious freedom. The government worked with international partners to implement key aspects of the 2019 Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (APPR) and hold violators accountable. Local non-governmental organizations continued to implement successful programs to strengthen interfaith tolerance. As a result, violence targeting individuals on the basis of their religion or belief declined. Accordingly, in its [2021 Annual Report](#), which reports on the 2020 calendar year, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) did not recommend CAR for placement on the State Department's Special Watch List for severe religious freedom violations, as USCIRF had recommended the previous year.

At the same time, religious minorities continue to face ongoing low-level religious freedom violations in CAR. These include disproportionate challenges in registering to vote, discrimination from local officials, and continued vigilante and mob violence against alleged witches and sorcerers. Moreover, broader ongoing challenges — including renewed post-election violence and impunity for individuals who committed grave human rights violations — have the potential to trigger backsliding.

In this context, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government:

- Continue to monitor religious freedom conditions in CAR;
- Urge the CAR government to make good on its promises to prioritize interfaith reconciliation and rebuild mosques and religious minority neighborhoods;
- Support efforts to ensure that the UN Mission in CAR (MINUSCA) has the mandate and resources it needs to protect civilians from sectarian violence and religious targeting; and
- Continue to fund the Special Criminal Court as it continues to investigate and try cases of mass atrocities and violations of international human rights law that occurred during the armed conflict.



## Background

CAR is a landlocked country roughly the size of France located in the center of the African continent. Roughly [89.5 percent](#) of the population identifies as Christian, while 8.5 percent identify as Muslim, 1 percent practice folk religions, and 1 percent are religiously unaffiliated.

In 2012, predominantly Muslim militias in the north of the country, known as *Seleka*, joined forces and marched on the capital, Bangui, toppling the government led by then-President François Bozizé. In response, predominantly Christian and animist militias, called *anti-balaka*, mobilized for self-protection and began retaliating against Muslim civilian communities. This triggered more than half-a-decade of ethnoreligious violence, including attacks on individuals based on their religious identity and deliberate attacks on [houses of worship](#) and [religious enclaves](#) in cities across CAR. Much of this violence took place in the broader context of politically and economically driven conflict as armed groups with socioeconomic aims vied for territorial control.

In February 2019, the CAR government under President Faustin-Archange Touadéra signed a peace accord with 14 armed groups. Nevertheless, CAR continues to face significant humanitarian challenges. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has [predicted](#) that more than half the country's population will need humanitarian assistance and protection in the coming year, with nearly two million facing acute food insecurity. More than 20 percent of the country remains displaced, with more than half of displaced Central Africans living as refugees in neighboring countries.

## Progress on Protection of Religious Freedom

Combined national and local level efforts contributed to a [reduction in sectarian violence in 2020](#). Many signatories to the APPR continued to implement key aspects of the agreement in good faith, including the creation of the [Commission on Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation](#), the [return of national security forces](#) to some areas, and robust operations to hold violators of the agreement accountable. [Multilateral](#) and [non-government organizations](#) continued implementing highly effective local-level dialogue projects to reduce tensions among religious groups and build social cohesion.

Notably, while ethnic and political violence [persisted](#) in some areas, reports of sectarian violence and religious targeting reduced across much of the country. Additionally, there were no reports of attacks on houses of worship in 2020.

In addition, government officials have committed to prioritizing efforts that will heal sectarian divides as well as other ethnic and social tensions. Following his reelection in December, President Touadéra [told reporters](#) that security, peacebuilding, and reconciliation would be the focus of his next term, along with rebuilding the economy.

## Ongoing Religious Freedom Challenges

Despite the incremental progress, many religious minorities remain displaced outside CAR. Although refugee agencies do not collect data on the religious identity of CAR refugees, anecdotal evidence from multiple sources on the ground agree that religious minorities, particularly Muslims, are disproportionately represented among CAR's refugee population.

Consequently, Muslim Central Africans have faced disproportionate challenges in registering to vote and were underrepresented in December's national elections. Despite strong international pressure and bilateral offers of assistance, the Touadéra government [made no significant effort](#) to register Central African refugees living outside the country to ensure religious minorities and other displaced persons were adequately represented in the December elections.

Furthermore, local authorities continued to discriminate against Muslims. Individuals familiar with the situation on the ground report that officials charged higher fees to Central Africans with "Muslim-sounding names" when they register to vote or register for their national identification cards. This "Muslim tax" is driven by corruption and opportunism on the part of local officials, not by top-down discriminatory government policies.

Additionally, mob and vigilante violence against alleged witches and individuals accused of sorcery remains a [constant problem](#). Some analysts report that years of instability and violence have yielded a [rise in witch hunts](#) and [accusations of witchcraft](#) that have contributed to trauma and mental illness, particularly among children.

In this context, religious freedom gains are fragile and at high risk of regressing. The Special Criminal Court, tasked with trying perpetrators responsible for grave human rights violations and serious violations of international humanitarian law during the crisis, has been [slow to operationalize](#) due to political, security, financial, and administrative constraints. Evidence for prosecutions is difficult to collect in a country ravaged by war and challenged by poor transportation and communications infrastructure.

Moreover, the [post-election violence](#) that engulfed many CAR communities in early 2021 has the potential to reignite religious tensions and fuel faith-based violence. Following the elections, armed fighters from a new opposition coalition mobilized and vied with national security forces and UN peacekeepers for control of urban centers and access routes throughout the country. The resulting violence [displaced over 200,000 people](#) in the span of two months.

Some of this violence appears to have targeted civilians based on religious identity. In February, armed groups [attacked a mosque](#) in pursuit of political opponents, killing 14 people. In May, [national security forces](#) reportedly arrested and tortured civilians from a local Muslim community, including five women, based on their perceived association with a predominantly Muslim rebel group in the area. In June, armed groups outside of Alindao set fire to [seven vehicles belonging to Christian missionaries](#). In the context of previous sectarian cleavages and impunity for religious freedom violations, similar attacks and outbreaks of sectarian violence are likely to occur.

## Conclusion

Over the course of 2020, CAR made progress on the protection of religious freedom of its citizens. Continued respect for the APPR over the course of the year, combined with local peacebuilding and interfaith programs, contributed to a reduction in religious targeting and sectarian violence in most parts of the country.

Yet religious minorities in CAR continue to face ongoing violations. Local officials continued to discriminate opportunistically against Muslims, and refugees, including many religious minorities, were not able to participate in the country's national elections in December. Slow judicial progress and the breakdown of the APPR in early 2021 threaten to derail fragile gains that have been made.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.