



Central African Republic

Stable / Unchanged

Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **73.5%**
- Muslims : **13.8%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **11.8%**
- Others : **0.9%**

4,998,000

622,984 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Central African Republic's (CAR's) new constitution was approved by a referendum on 13th December 2015 and promulgated on 30th March 2016. It marks the end of the political transition that followed the crisis caused by the takeover by Seleka rebels in March 2013 and replaces the transitional charter put in place in July 2013.

The preamble of the new constitution recognises the religious and cultural diversity of the Central African people. Article 8 guarantees "freedom of conscience, of assembly, [and] of the free exercise of beliefs" and forbids "all forms of religious fundamentalism and intolerance". Article 18 proclaims the secular character of the state^[1]

The Government of the CAR signed a framework agreement, equivalent to a concordat, with the Holy See, on 6th September 2016.

Religious groups, except for followers of traditional religions, are required to register with the Ministry of the Interior and Public Security. Registration can be refused if it is deemed that the group presents a threat to public morals and/or social peace. The procedure is free and confers official recognition and certain benefits, including tax benefits, but there are no penalties for groups that fail to register.^[2]

Residency permits for expatriate personnel working with religious organisations can be easily renewed^[3]

New religious groups, particularly Pentecostal or "born-again" Churches have been coming to CAR during the last few years, and have held religious services without difficulties. In some cases, official government buildings, like the Foreign Ministry in Bangui, are availed to them for public religious ceremonies^[4]

Religious education is not compulsory but is available in most schools. The Catholic Church has a network of schools in

all nine of the country's dioceses, coordinated by the Écoles Catholiques Associées en Centrafrique (ÉCAC), based on a memorandum of understanding signed with the Education Ministry. Foreigners working for ÉCAC are granted a free residency permit. 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, the Ascension, the Assumption of Our Lady, All Saints and Christmas – are public holidays. Since 2017, following a national reconciliation conference, the main Muslim festivities – Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Kebir – have also been public holidays.

Incidents

After a few months of peace in early 2016, the country plunged back into the sectarian strife that had begun in 2012.^[5] On 7th January 2018, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, put the number of internally displaced persons at 630,000, with another 545,000 refugees in neighbouring countries. These are the highest figures since the beginning of the crisis.^[6]

There have been many acts of discrimination and violent attacks, including retaliatory killings between communities. While in Bangui the violence can be controlled relatively quickly, the same cannot be said outside the capital where at least 14 militias operate. Whether calm is restored depends on the speed of intervention of the UN mission (MINUSCA)^[7] and the level of mediation by the Catholic Church.

Members of the Muslim community reported continued discrimination, including in government. Islamic organisations were disappointed with the first government of President Faustin-Archange Touadera, in 2016, which had only four Muslim members, and with the Offices of the President and the Prime Minister, which had none. On 12th September 2017, a cabinet reshuffle added four more Muslims. Three Muslims became senior presidential advisers. Four days later the President appointed new prefects in the country's 16 prefectures, but none of them were Muslims.

According to many witnesses, Muslim truck drivers were systematically singled out at checkpoints, harassed and forced to pay money to the police, gendarmerie, and soldiers.^[8]

Some incidents have led to retaliation in the capital. On 19th June 2016, 26 Muslims travelling in a MINUSCA-escorted convoy were stopped and taken for questioning to the outskirts of Bangui. An armed group based in PK5, Bangui's main Muslim neighbourhood, retaliated by abducting six policemen. The next day, the same armed militia tried to capture the local police station and fired on the Rwandan contingent protecting it. Among the assailants, eight people were reported dead and 13 wounded. As tensions rose in Bangui, a Muslim man in a mainly Christian quarter near PK5 was reportedly abducted and killed. The abducted policemen were released after a week in captivity.^[9]

On 4th October 2016, a gunman thought to belong to a Muslim armed group fired on a vehicle driven by Major Marcel Mombeka, wounding his 14-year-old son. Soon after, a group of soldiers killed a Muslim moto-taxi driver. Suspected soldiers also killed three Fulani Muslim herdsmen, near Bangui's slaughter house. At 4.40pm clashes were reported between opposing groups near the Fatima Church. In total, 11 people were killed and MINUSCA reported 22 wounded in the city's hospitals.

The Church has been called in to stop sectarian violence. Following the violence on 4th October 2016, Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, the Archbishop of Bangui, led a march on 12th October from the Third District to PK5 and back. He met with members of armed groups, including Abdoul Danda, who handed over to him a man held hostage for two weeks.

In other cases, threats have displaced whole communities. On 20th January 2017, about 20 armed men from Big Man's group partially burnt down a temporary shelter used as a place of worship near the Baptist church in Mbaya Dombia (Third District). After the Baptists rebuilt the shelter, the same militias attacked it again on 24th January, leaving a note

saying that they would not allow any church to be rebuilt until mosques were rebuilt. As a result, the Baptist pastors moved their church to Boeing, a neighbouring Christian quarter.^[10]

Police crackdowns often cause retaliation between religious groups, with Christians often the victims. On 7th February 2017, police shot dead Big Man and his deputy in PK5. Later in the evening, his militia stabbed to death an Evangelical pastor, Rev Jean Paul Sankagui, a much-respected figure in PK5 who had gone to his church in Ramandji to be with some of his parishioners who had found refuge there.

At the same time, some remarkable initiatives have been undertaken to aid relations between Christian and Muslim communities. After local leaders from PK5 and Boeing signed a non-aggression pact on 11th February 2016, Muslims were able to use their cemetery in Boeing, which is located five kilometres from PK5. Previously they had been unable to travel to the cemetery because of hostility from the area's mostly Christian residents.

Since mid-2016, efforts have been made to rehabilitate at least eight mosques located in mainly Christian areas, which brings a semblance of normality and free movement to many Bangui districts. All mosques outside PK5 had been destroyed by anti-Balaka^[11] militias in early 2014.^[12]

Interfaith cooperation has also involved civilians. Bangui's Fifth District was once home to 20,000 Muslims^[13] forced out by anti-balaka militias at the beginning of 2014. Since January 2017, a Comité de Retour of Christian residents tried to sensitise their neighbours with MINUSCA support. By the end of the year, they had managed to get 80 Muslim families to return. As part of that reconciliation effort, the district's main mosque, located in Mali Maka neighbourhood, was reopened at the feast marking the end of Ramadan, on 25th June 2017.

Outside of Bangui, things are different. During 2016-2017 and the first months of 2018, most of the country saw heavy violence which involved 14 armed groups (including animist groups) engaged in sectarian fighting.

In the south-eastern town of Bangassou, which had been militia-free since the end of 2013 and where Christians and Muslims co-existed well, things changed drastically on 13th May 2017 when self-styled self-defence militias made up of young men from nearby villages attacked the town, targeting its Muslim population. More than 70 people were killed on that day, and more than 2,000 Muslims took refuge in the mosque, which was surrounded by militiamen. The intervention of the Catholic bishop, Monsignor Juan José Aguirre, prevented a greater massacre. The next day, MINUSCA forces took the Muslims to diocesan headquarters. However, they have not been able to leave because of harassment from the self-defence militia.^[14]

Some of the young Muslims displaced in Bangassou have become increasingly radicalised, and have managed to obtain firearms. Given the tensions, they have often targeted the very institution that gave them protection. On various occasions they have broken into and looted the diocesan offices and residences. On 5th January 2018, Father Alain Bissialo, who chairs of the local peace and reconciliation committee, was attacked and seriously injured in the parish house in the Tokoyo neighbourhood. On 9th April 2018, after one week of negotiations mediated by Cardinal Nzapalainga and Imam Kobine Layama, the armed groups present in Bangassou signed a peace accord which guaranteed the free movement of people, including the displaced Muslims living at the diocesan compound.^[15] However, violence flared up again in February and March 2018, and one of the priests had to leave Bangassou for good. Ever since Bangassou was attacked, sectarian conflicts have spread rapidly to other parts of eastern CAR like Bakouma, Nzako, Gambo, Bema, Pombolo, Rafai, Mboki and Zemio.

Foreign militias have also come into the picture as they seek to grab land within CAR. In Zemio, militias reportedly associated with the Janjaweed from Sudan, launched an attack on 2nd September 2017. A retired priest, Father Louis Tongagnessi, who taught at a college, was murdered trying to find a safe shelter.^[16] The day before, the two diocesan priests in charge of the local Catholic parish, Father Jean-Alain Zimbi and Father Desiré Blaise Kpangou, and the 15,000 people who had sheltered in their church for weeks, crossed the nearby Mbomou River into the Democratic Republic of Congo. As soon as they left, the church compound was assaulted and looted by armed men. There were also many reports of anti-balaka militias attacking and burning villages with Muslims.

Bria, also in the east, saw heavy fighting between an ex-Seleka^[17] militia and anti-balaka. On 4th September 2017, a parish priest, Father Ephrem Pounaba, narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by the ex-Seleka forces. Around the same time, a Polish fidei donum priest working in Ngaoundaye (Diocese of Bouar, northwestern CAR) was abducted by another ex-Seleka group.^[18]

In conflict zones, the Catholic Church has pursued interreligious dialogue, often finding herself persecuted by those involved. For example, two Catholic priests in Kembé set up a forum (Union des Confessions Religieuses de Kembé pour la Paix) between Catholics, Protestants and Muslims.^[19]

In the absence of interfaith dialogue, there were thefts, abductions and large scale material destruction. "On Friday 22nd September 2017, towards 4:00 pm, the anti-balaka came to steal goats in the village of Caf-Bangui, leaving 40 people dead. The next day, the ex-Seleka received reinforcements and attacked the village of Mbingo, 10 kilometres from Kembé. The Catholic and Evangelical churches in Kembé hosted many displaced persons from Caf-Bangui, but the ex-Seleka ordered them to vacate the churches. Later, on 10th October, the whole of Kembé came under heavy gunfire after 1,800 fighters from Bangassou and Mingala tried to encircle the town. The fighting, which started at 4:00 am and lasted until midday, left 150 people killed."^[20] The priests deplored the fact that many Catholic youth and several parish counsellors and catechists joined the anti-balaka and turned against them. In the end, they left Kembé to save their lives.

During the 10th October attack in Kembé, the anti-balaka attacked the mosque, where reportedly 44 people, mostly Muslims but also some Christians, had taken refuge. At least 26 were killed.^[21] A Protestant pastor, Jean-Fernand Dangouin, was compelled to leave Kembé during heavy clashes between UPC and self-defence militiamen between 5 and 10 January 2018.^[22]

In Ouaka Prefecture, Father Joseph Désiré Angbabat, was seriously wounded on 21st March 2018 during a UPC attack against the town of Séko. He was shot in Saint Charles Lwanga Parish Church where he had given shelter to many civilians. He was evacuated but succumbed to his wounds two days later.^[23]

On 3rd April 2018, MINUSCA peacekeepers discovered the bodies of 21 civilians (including four children) near a church in Tagbara, 60 kilometres north-east of Bambari, also in Ouaka Prefecture. Initial findings suggest self-defence militias were the authors of the massacre. The next day, gruesome pictures of the incident were posted in Facebook, with comments indicating the victims were Muslims targeted because of their religion. Some were found decapitated; one victim, a pregnant woman, had her womb slit open.^[24]

Despite progress in Bangui towards religious freedom and better interfaith relationships, a serious incident took place on 1st May 2018. Militiamen, presumed to be Muslim, from a PK5-based self-defence group led by ringleader Amineri Matar aka "Force" stormed Notre-Dame de Fatima Church during a Mass. On 2nd May, the CAR Red Cross reported that 27 people were killed and 170 wounded in the incident.^[25]

One of the people killed in the Fatima church was Father Albert Toungoumale-Baba, a much-respected diocesan priest who had played an outstanding role for years in promoting reconciliation between Muslims and Christians in Bangui. Following the massacre, an angry crowd of over 1,000 people carried his body through the streets up to the Presidential Palace, where they were dispersed by police who fired in the air. Some of the protesters came to the Lakouanga neighbourhood, home to an important Muslim community, and partially destroyed the mosque. Two Muslim men were

also burnt alive.^[26]

Prospects for freedom of religion

During the reporting period, the state of religious freedom continued to deteriorate in the Central African Republic. Although prominent religious leaders have consistently denied that the conflict had a religious character, numerous acts of violence were committed in which individuals and/or communities were targeted because of their religion. Since various armed groups operate in about 80 percent of the country, and as the conflict is escalating in many areas, the situation of religious freedom is likely to get worse.

Endnotes / Sources

[1] See also Central African Republic's Constitution of 2004 with Amendments through 2010, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Central_African_Republic_2010.pdf?lang=en), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Central_African_Republic_2010.pdf?lang=en, (accessed 5th June 2018).

[2] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Central African Republic', International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2016/>, (accessed 5th June 2018).

[3] Conversation, on 6 January 2018, with an expatriate Catholic priest who has worked in CAR since 2011.

[4] Personal observation of the author of this report, who has lived regularly in CAR since mid-2012.

[5] Detailed accounts of most incidents of violence in CAR during the reporting period can be found in the 2016 and 2017 reports of the UN Panel of Experts, which every year publishes a midterm report and a final report. They are available at Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 2127 (2013) concerning the Central African Republic, Security Council Subsidiary Organs, <https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/2127/panel-of-experts/reports>, (accessed 5th June 2018).

[6] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Central African Republic (CAR), <http://www.unocha.org/car>, (accessed 5th June 2018).

[7] The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic is better known by its French acronym MINUSCA, which is the Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations unies pour la stabilisation en Centrafrique.

[8] Three meetings, held during 2017, with Ali Ousmane, chairman of Coordination of Muslim Organisations of Central Africa (Coordination des Organisations Musulmans de Centrafrique, COMUC).

[9] This incident and the ones which are reported in Bangui were directly documented by the author, who worked in Bangui during 2016, most of 2017 and the first months of 2018.

[10] The author of this report visited the burnt-out site and talked to the Baptist pastors the days after the attacks.

[11] The anti-balaka are militias erroneously labelled Christian, initially created to protect villages. See "Repair of a vehicle for the diocese of Bambari, following the rebel attacks", Aid to the Church in Need Canada, 13th March 2015, <https://acn-canada.org/tag/anti-balaka-en/>, (accessed 6th June 2018).

[12] The Imam of the mosque of Petevo, Abdoulaye Washelege, expressed his gratitude towards Cardinal Nzapalainga, who supported them with 400,000CFA and two other Christian churches from Petevo who also gave some donations for the reconstruction of the mosque. Conversation with the author on 23rd June 2017.

[13] Interview with the Mayor of Bangui's 5th district, Alain Yemo, in April 2017.

[14] Conversations with the Bishop of Bangassou, Juan José Aguirre, and his auxiliary bishop Jesús Ruiz, on 7th January 2018, in Bangui.

[15] Judicael Yongo, "Centrafrique : Les groupes armés signent un accord de paix à Bangassou pour faciliter la libre circulation des personnes et des biens", Réseau des Journalistes pour les Droits l'Homme, 11th April 2018, <http://rjdh.org/centrafrique-les-groupes-armes-signent-un-accord-de-paix-a-bangassou-pour-faciliter-la-libre-circulation-des-personnes-et-des-biens/>, (accessed 5th June 2018).

[16] Ngala Killian Chimtom, "Cardinal laments deadly year for Church in Central African Republic", Crux, 16th January 2018, <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2018/01/16/cardinal-laments-deadly-year-church-central-african-republic/>, (accessed 6th June 2018).

[17] This particular ex-Seleka group are known as the Popular Front for the Renaissance of Central Africa (Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique).

[18] This ex-Seleka group is called Movement for Peace in Central Africa (Mouvance pour la Paix en Centrafrique, MPC).

[19] The author of this report had access to the journal written by the two priests between September and October 2017, which they sent to their bishop and was circulated among many priests.

[20] Ibid.

[21] UN group of experts on the CAR, December 2017.

[22] "Centrafrique : Le récit du drame de la Basse-Kotto avec le poignant témoignage du Pasteur Jean Dangouin", Bangui.com, 28th February 2018, <http://news.abangui.com/h/61985.html> (accessed 5th June 2018).

[23] Official statement, dated 23rd March 2018, by Bishop Richard Appora, of the diocese of Bambari.

[24] Central African Muslim Collective (Collectif des Musulmans Centrafricains-CMC, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/284717978724883/about/>, (accessed 5th June 2018).

[25] The account of this incident is based on conversations of the author on 1st May 2018 with some of his personal contacts from Bangui, including clergy from Notre Dame de Fatima.

[26] "RCA: l'église Notre-Dame de Fatima attaquée, flambée de violences à Bangui", RFI Afrique, 2nd May 2018, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20180501-rca-eglise-notre-dame-fatima-bangui-attaquee>, (accessed 5th June 2018).