

Institute on Religion and Public Policy Report:

Religious Freedom in the Republic of Angola

Executive Summary

(1) Article 8 of the Angolan Constitution provides for religious freedom, affirms that Angola is a secular state, and declares that all religions must be equally protected. While these assertions may prove relatively accurate for many of Angola's Christian population, the lack of legal recognition for Angola's minority faith groups, allows religious discrimination to occur. The Islamic population of Angola has proven extremely vulnerable to discrimination by both the state and society. The state has repeatedly refused to recognize Islam as an official religion and promulgates a negative and fearful image of not only the religion, but its practitioners, many of whom are illegal immigrants. The government's tensions with those who practice indigenous beliefs further highlights the concerns over religious freedom in Angola. Children and the elderly have faced abuse from individuals whose religious beliefs instill in them a fear of supposedly evil spirits. Finally, there are concerns over the mistreatment of Catholics in Cabinda who have vocalized their discontent with the Angolan government's control over what they believe to be their land.

(2) Precise statistics on Angola's religious demographics are hard to verify. However, it is clear that Roman Catholics make up the largest portion of the country's population of 16 million with an estimated 55%. Another 25%, follow various African Christian churches, while approximately 10% belong to various Protestant faiths. Indigenous beliefs are still very important in the culture and are often practiced in addition to Christianity.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

(3) Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

Introduction to Legal Status

(4) Following its independence from Portugal in November 1975, the Republic of Angola adopted a constitution that values individual freedoms, including the freedom of

religion. The newly formed government also declared itself to be a secular country, supporting the principal of the separation of church and state. However, the Government of Angola does require, under law no. 2/04, that religious organizations register for legal status. Only once a group has obtained legal status are they able to freely construct houses of worship and affiliated schools. In order to achieve this status, the religious organization must submit general information about the background of their organization to the Ministries of Justice and Culture and show that it has a minimum of 100,000 adult followers, who are legal citizens of the state.

(5) Although not a problem for the large religious organizations in Angola, such as the Catholic Church, registration laws prove challenging for smaller groups. In 2008, there were 800 religious organizations waiting for their registration applications to be approved. Included amongst these groups are the approximately 80,000-90,000 Muslims living in Angola. As far as the state is concerned, this number is even lower, as many of the Muslims residing within Angola are illegal immigrants from other regions of Africa, including Senegal, Mali and Nigeria. UNHCHR reports that despite multiple attempts to be registered (in 2004 and 2006) a Muslim group, represented by the Central Mosque of Luanda, as of July 2009, has yet to receive legal status. The same is true of numerous minority Christian groups and those who practice indigenous forms of animism and witchcraft.

State and Society: Acts of Discrimination and Abuse

(6) Some within Angola and the larger international community fear that there is more to Angola's refusal to legally recognize the country's Islamic community. As in many parts of the world, the Islamic faith is generally viewed negatively. Islam is a new phenomenon in Angola, brought to the area by West Africans who immigrated to the country following the end of the twenty-seven year long Angolan Civil War. Many of these immigrants entered the country illegally, leading many Angolans to associate Islam with illegal immigration and crime. Major cultural differences between Angolans and their West African counterparts have only further exasperated the negative image of Islam. Experts believe that these associations are a bigger factor in societal and governmental discrimination than actual religious intolerance.

(7) The government not only does nothing to help quell the concerns of its citizen's about Islam, but in fact increases fear. News organizations, such as the Angolan Press, assert that the state's Minister of Culture, Rosa Cruz e Silva, has openly vocalized fears of the expansion of Islamic community within Angola, which the government believes will damage the "...organization and structure of Angolan society". They continue to make public statements linking Islam with international terrorism, as well as, increasing crime rates. Fátima Viegas of the National Institute of Religious Affairs in Angola, continued to fuel the fire, when she informed the National Assembly that they were looking into claims that young Angolan women were marrying Muslim men and being kept as "...slaves who are forced to be subjected to habits that have nothing to do with the customs of the Angolan people". However, no human rights organizations have reported any evidence to support these claims.

(8) Islam, by no means, is the only target of government suspicion and discrimination. The government has discriminated against many indigenous belief systems, which use shamans and perform animal sacrifices, as well as the break-way churches that seek to combine traditional beliefs and evangelical Christianity. The Government states that their campaigns against these groups are based out of concern over the sometimes abusive behaviors of these religious organizations. In particular, the state is worried about the growing incidents of violent exorcisms, which have been taking place in certain areas. These rituals are physical attempts to drive so-called evil spirits, or 'Ndoki', out of the possessed person, often children or the elderly. As a result, seventeen religious groups in the volatile province of Cabinda have been banned by the state.

(9) These indigenous practices, including the strong fear of evil spirits and witches, have also faced heavy criticism from civil society groups and the main stream religious groups. Civil Society groups, like the government, state that they are trying to prevent harmful religious practices, but have no problem with the peaceful practice of witchcraft or other indigenous religious beliefs. Other religions have expressed concerns over both the physical safety and doctrinal issues associated with these indigenous beliefs in evil and the often accompanying exorcisms. Most notably, this year, has been the criticisms made by Pope Benedict XVI. Speaking to the Angolan public on a visit to the country in March, he urged Angolans to give up their fear of these spirits, in favor of following the Christian faith.

(10) Religious leaders do speak openly in their houses of worship and in public about their views on issues facing Angola and the larger world. Overall, it appears that clergy and other religious leaders felt comfortable speaking about their opinions and criticizing the state, although many have admitted to censoring their topics of discussion on issues they deemed to be of a more sensitive or highly political nature (such as human rights, governance and elections). It is reported that journalists often do the same thing, fearing possible backlash from the government.

(11) Ecclesia, a Catholic radio station in Luanda and the only religious radio network in the country, was noted by the United States State Department as being particularly vocal in expressing a variety of political opinions. One of the stations reporters, Armando Chikoca was arrested and found guilty of "inciting violence and disobedience" in December of 2007. Despite outcries from human rights groups which proclaimed his innocence, the Church disassociated itself from Chikoca, who ultimately lost his job. The station has also previously protested government interference in its programming by going off the air for a few days. Unfortunately, due to a lack of funding and laws, which state that radio stations can only broadcast in the province in which they are located, Ecclesia is not able to expand its broadcasts and reach a wider audience.

Cabinda:

(12) For 40 years, since they were incorporated into Angola, following the departure of the Portuguese government, Cabinda fought the Angolans for independence. In the summer of 2007 a formal peace agreement was reached between the state of Angola and

Cabinda Forum for Dialogue. Despite being given special status by the Angolan government, there was no great improvement in the situation and those in Cabinda still face grave human rights abuses at the hands of the Angolan military. Among those targeted are those involved with the Catholic Church in Cabinda.

(13) The Church in Cabinda has been divided since the 2006 Vatican appointment of an Angolan Bishop, Bishop Filomeno Vieira Dias, as Bishop of Cabinda. This was a major blow to the Catholic Church in Cabinda, which played a large and often vocal role in supporting Cabinda's independence struggle. As such, some of those who protested the new Bishop or members of the church who are still involved in the opposition to Angola have faced harassment and even arrest by the Angolan authorities.

Positive Developments in Regards to Religious Freedom

(14) Although Islam is still not legally recognized as a religion by the state, it appears that mosques have been allowed to operate freely in recent years. This is a great improvement, as the government of Angola had previously forced four mosques to close in the capital of Luanda in January of 2006, although all had been allowed to reopen by the end of the year.

Conclusions

(15) Although Angola has the legal framework in place to protect religious freedom, there remains significant room for improvement. The international community must encourage Angola to comply with the international standards of religious freedom, which it is party to, but has not fulfilled. The issue of alleged abuses against those in Cabinda, including those in the Catholic Church, must be taken up by the international community. International human rights organizations must continue to investigate and document claims made against the Angolan military.

(16) The government of Angola must also take action to ensure the religious freedom of its citizens. Angola must reconsider its process for registering religions and recognize minority groups, particularly Islam, as legitimate religions. The Angolan government must also work to protect the children of their state from accusations of witchcraft and subsequent abuses, as they are obliged to do by law. However, they must also ensure that they are punishing only those directly responsible for these crimes and not the entire belief system to which these persons subscribe.