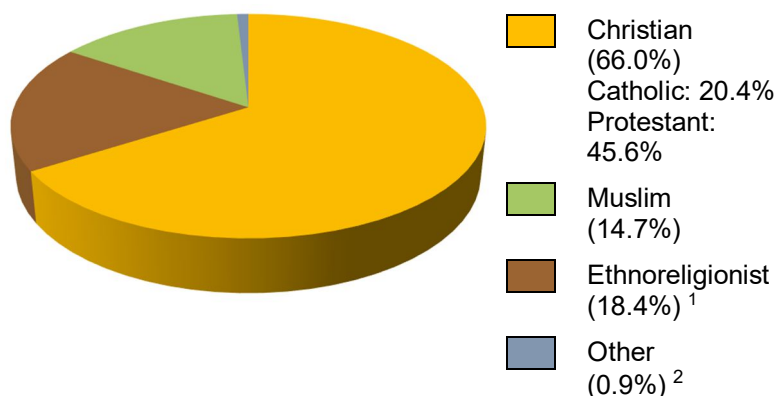


# CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC



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<b>Area</b> <sup>3</sup> : 622,984 km <sup>2</sup>	<b>Population</b> <sup>4</sup> : 4,692,000	<b>Political system</b> : Democracy <sup>5</sup>	<b>Major Language(s)</b> : French, Sangho
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## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Central African Republic (CAR) is ruled by a new constitution, approved by referendum on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2015 and promulgated on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2016. The process brought to a conclusion the political transition which followed the crisis sparked by the violent takeover of the Seleka, which overthrew the government in March 2013. The new constitution replaces the “Charte de la Transition”, which ruled the country as a provisional constitution since July 2013.

The preamble of the new constitution recognises “the religious and cultural diversity of the Central African People, which contributes to the enrichment of their personality”. Article 10 guarantees “the freedom of conscience, of religion and of worship” and it forbids “all forms of religious fundamentalism and intolerance”. Article 24 proclaims the secular character of the State.

All religious groups must be State-registered. All religious denominations have the right to broadcast a weekly programme on the State radio, and to operate their own radio stations. Bangui-based Radio Nôtre Dame, which is Catholic, and Radio Voix de l’Evangile (known previously as Radio Nehemie), which is Protestant, are the main confessional radio stations. Some other Catholic stations, which stopped their broadcasts following Seleka’s violent actions in the towns where they used to operate, broadcast freely these days: Radio Siriri, in Bouar, and Radio Maria Be Africa, in Bossangoa, are the ones with a larger following. Radio Maria has been broadcasting in Bangui since the end of 2013.

Religious education is not compulsory, but nonetheless is available in most schools. The Catholic Church has its own schools, a network in all of the country’s nine dioceses, coordinated under the ECAC (French acronym for ‘Catholic Teaching’) office with a memorandum of understanding signed with the Ministry of Education.

The main religious Christian festivities are public holidays: Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Assumption of Our Lady, All Saints and Christmas. The “Pacte Republicaine”, which was the

document of conclusions and recommendations adopted on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2015 at the end of the Forum of Bangui, a national conference on reconciliation, strongly recommended that the State adopts the main Muslim festivals. Thereafter, the transition government adopted this recommendation and added the festivities of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Kebir as public holidays.

## **Incidents**

Inter-religious violence in CAR was relatively low until the recent crisis broke out. The Seleka, a loose coalition of different rebel groups from the north-east of the country, where Muslims are a majority, began a major offensive in December 2012 and it took power on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2013. Non-Muslim populations and Christian institutions were targeted, prompting a violent backlash from self-defence groups known as anti-balaka. Although this group has often been branded as “Christian militias”, their identity is mainly animist and no Christian religious leader – Catholic or Protestant – backed their cause. The Seleka lost political power in Bangui in January 2014, but at the time of writing they still hold sway in vast parts of the country.

During the reporting period, both militias have continued to kill individuals based on their religious identity, leading to retaliatory attacks and waves of violence. CAR’s Muslim population remains disproportionately displaced – and in the western part of the country trapped in peacekeeper enclaves where they are unable to practise their faith freely. By the end of 2014, 80 percent of the country’s Muslim population had been driven out of CAR.<sup>6</sup> By mid-2016 some of them, mostly those who could afford the journey, have returned to their country, mainly to Bangui’s traditional Muslim enclave, known as “Kilometre Cinq”.

In the western part of the country, the country’s Muslim minority has largely disappeared. While a few towns have Muslim enclaves protected by international peacekeeping forces, many other towns and villages that were previously home to substantial Muslim communities are now empty of their Muslim inhabitants. Mosques have been left badly damaged or destroyed. In July 2015<sup>7</sup>, Amnesty International, the human rights organisation, published a report stating that in some places, anti-balaka militia forcibly converted Muslims to Christianity, or put Muslims under intense pressure to convert. Except in some towns where UN peacekeepers have been stationed, Muslims were effectively barred from practising or manifesting their religion in public. Amnesty’s report stated: “This means that they cannot pray (except in secret); they cannot wear traditional Muslim clothing, and they cannot rebuild their mosques. Often they dare not even speak their preferred language within hearing range of others. Although members of the larger community may be aware that they are Muslim, their religion has been made invisible.”<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, in Bangui’s 2<sup>nd</sup> district, a joint initiative by Christians and Muslims at the Lakouanga neighbourhood strove to rebuild the local mosque after it was destroyed in a retaliatory attack by anti-balaka at the end of May 2014. However, following a flare-up of sectarian violence in the CAR capital that started on 26<sup>th</sup> September, it was attacked for the second time on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2015 and badly damaged. By February 2016, a joint committee had been formed to continue the work of building the mosque and by the end of March Friday prayers resumed.

In July 2015, the interim parliament, the National Transitional Council, voted to prohibit CAR refugees from voting in the presidential and legislative elections. Given that Muslims make up the majority of refugees, this vote would have disenfranchised that population. The Constitutional Court, however, overruled the vote that same month, and refugees were able to vote in the December 2015 and February 2016 elections.

From 26<sup>th</sup> September to 16<sup>th</sup> October 2015, Bangui was the scene of the most recent escalation of violence in the CAR, almost a year after similar incidents (8<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> October 2014). The surge of violence left 79 civilians dead and 512 injured. By 16<sup>th</sup> October, the violence resulted in 17,090 persons displaced and caused 2,894 refugees to flee across the Ubangi River to Zongo, Democratic Republic of the Congo.<sup>9</sup>

The violence started when, during the night of 25<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> September 2015, the body of a young moto-taxi driver was discovered in Bangui's predominantly Christian eighth district. His presumed killers had tattooed his chest with the legend: "Happy feast of the Tabaski". As his body was left in front of the Ali Babolo mosque, in the "Kilometre Cinq" Bangui's Muslim neighbourhood, angry self-defence Muslim militia attacked the neighbouring fifth district (predominantly Christian) shooting their weapons and setting hundreds of houses on fire. One hour later, hundreds of anti-balaka militants descended from their traditional fiefdoms in Combatants, Gobongo and Boy Rabe and pitched battles were fought during several hours. During the violence of the first day, Muslims militias attacked and damaged the premises of St Mathias Mulumba Catholic Church, in PK5, and they burnt down the Catholic Parish of St Michelle, including the church, the priests's house and a social centre, in Bangui's fifth district.<sup>10</sup>

A few days after the violence had subsided, tensions flared-up again on 26<sup>th</sup> October 2015, when four members of a delegation from an ex-Seleka group (Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique), who had come to Bangui for consultations with the national authorities, were attacked by armed men, abducted and killed, as they were in a taxi in the Combatant neighborhood, eighth district of Bangui. As news of these attacks reached PK5, three young Christian men from Lakouanga neighbourhood, who used to sell water packs at the PK5 market, were assassinated in a revenge attack. Meanwhile, at the PK5 Central Mosque, Archbishop Dieudonne Nzapalainga of Bangui, who was conducting a preparatory mission for the planned visit of Pope Francis to CAR with some government and Vatican officials, was verbally attacked and threatened by an ex-Seleka leader called Haroun Gaye. The tension forced the delegation to make a hasty exit. Gaye is reported to have returned to the mosque in the afternoon with some of his militiamen and threaten Imam Tidjani for cooperating with the delegation. Later on in the evening, Archbishop Nzapalainga issued a statement appealing for calm and forgiveness.

Three days later, on 29<sup>th</sup> October, three Muslim drivers of moto-taxi from PK5 were killed in the neighbouring sixth district during a dispute with some of their Christian colleagues. Muslim militias retaliated by attacking Fatima neighbourhood and burning several houses. During that day and in the weeks that ensued, thousands of people took refuge at the Notre Dame de Fatima Catholic Church, which was constantly under gunfire from Muslim militias. The intervention of the Burundian contingent from MINUSCA prevented a massacre, but they could not prevent the armed men from carrying out widespread destruction. As they swept through predominantly Christian neighbourhoods, including Kina, Cattin, Fatima, Kokolo, Kpetene and Bearex, they carried out arson attacks and killed scores of Christian residents. The Baptist Church of Kina was burnt down. Also, the Filles de Marie Missionnaire, a community of religious Sisters, in the Bibale neighbourhood, was looted several times and their chapel desecrated.

During the violence from 26<sup>th</sup> October to the end of November, the Muslims from PK5 were forced to live in their neighbourhood as an isolated enclave. Anti-balaka militias prevented them from entering other parts of the city. Pope Francis' visit to Bangui, on 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> November 2015, marked a turning point. Despite many concerns that violence in Bangui would prevent the Pope

from making the trip, Pope Francis visited PK5 Central Mosque, where he pronounced a strong message of reconciliation between Christians and Muslims. That day, Christians and Muslims began moving freely again in all parts of Bangui and, for the first time in many months, Muslims were able to go freely everywhere wearing their attire, some of them even attending the final Papal Mass at Bangui's main stadium on 30<sup>th</sup> November. The previous day, Pope Francis went to Bangui Cathedral in a visit that anticipated the official opening of the Holy Year of Mercy. It was an event that took on an extraordinary significance in the context of the inter-faith violence that plagued the country after 2012.

Pope Francis' visit provided a powerful moment of catharsis for all Central Africans. Many of them were convinced that his presence had "removed the curse" that had weighed down on them for the last three years. At the end of December 2015, presidential and legislative elections took place in a much calmer atmosphere. On 30<sup>th</sup> March 2016 the newly elected president, Faustin Archange Touadera, was sworn-in, ushering in a new period of legitimate power that ended three years of a tumultuous transition.

During the first months of 2016, some incidents of discrimination on religious grounds continued to be reported. On 18<sup>th</sup> May, towards 2300, a lorry carrying passengers coming from Boda (Lobaye prefecture) reached the PK9 Police control checkpoint at the southern exit of Bangui. They were forced to spend the night there, and on the following day the Police officers asked the passengers to present their ID documents. According to eye-witnesses, those with Muslim names were asked to pay a sum of 5,000FCFA each. After pleading with the agents, the sum was reduced to 2,000CFAC.

Also, on 20<sup>th</sup> May, at around 4am, the Muezzin from the Central Mosque in Berbérati, Mambéré-Kadéï prefecture, was attacked by a group of presumed anti-Balaka elements inside the Mosque while he was getting ready to call Muslims to prayer. The attackers fled. He was later transported to the hospital.<sup>11</sup>

## **Prospects for freedom of religion**

The situation with regard to religious freedom deteriorated in the period immediately after 2012. However, in spite of different cycles of violence based on religious intolerance, there has been a gradual movement towards political and social stabilisation since the beginning of 2016. This is mainly because of the peaceful and credible legislative and presidential elections which marked a political transition to new democratically-elected authorities. With an increase in stabilisation, incidents of inter-religious violence and discrimination have diminished and many communities are engaged in processes of long-term reconciliation, a task involving different religious groups. In such circumstances, it is possible to imagine better prospects for religious freedom and tolerance in the near future.

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<sup>1</sup> Animists.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country\\_44\\_1.asp](http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_44_1.asp)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13150040>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13150040>

<sup>5</sup> formal democracy as changes in government have occurred in recent years by three methods: violence, negotiations and elections: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central\\_African\\_Republic#Government\\_and\\_politics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_African_Republic#Government_and_politics)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.uscirf.gov/countries/central-african-republic>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr19/2165/2015/en/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr19/2165/2015/en/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12222.doc.htm>

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<sup>10</sup> These two attacks, as well as the events described in the following paragraphs, were documented by the author of this report, who was present in Bangui during the second half of 2015.

<sup>11</sup> These two incidents were reported by the internal information system of the UN's integrated peacekeeping mission in CAR (MINUSCA)