

Muslims of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Muslims came to this vast country which is located in the hard-to-reach central part of Africa for the first time in the 18th century. Most of the Muslim population is concentrated in the east of the country, making up about 10-15% of the country's population. The majority of the rest of the population consists of evangelized indigenous people, and 10% who follow indigenous religions.

The first generation of Muslims consisted of merchants who, departing from the east coast of Africa, advanced for commercial reasons through Tanzania in the 1700s into the region that is now the DRC. Despite the commercial nature of their arrival, the relationship they had with the indigenous people of the region made way for the subsequent establishment of a populous Muslim settlement in the area.

Until the 1920s the Muslim presence was not felt strongly in the country which, since the 19th century, had been a Belgian colony. Since then, the Muslim presence in the country has been manifesting itself through the NGOs and Quranic schools that have been founded. But this time the domination of the educational system by Christian and colonial powers acted as a disincentive to Muslim involvement in public life and has always kept them away. Years of Belgian colonial rule not only saw restrictions on Muslim worship, but Muslim children were expelled from schools, force-fed pork, and people were forced to eat and drink during Ramadan.

The new era that followed the establishment of independence in 1960 brought more oppression for and discrimination against Muslims instead of more freedom. This era of instability saw a succession of civil wars and military coups and crises that claimed the lives of millions of people. The existing political and military conflicts in the areas where they lived contributed to the further marginalization of the Muslim minority. When the rulers of the country, then known as Zaire, harbored insurgents who had massacred tens of thousands of people in neighboring Rwanda and refused to return them, the armed forces of Uganda and Rwanda staged a joint invasion of the country in 1997. Having been renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo on that date, the country was then sucked into a civil war in 1998 involving its neighboring countries.

The numerous unstable interim governments allowed ample intervention from foreign countries. Though it has its ups and downs, a state of chaos has been ongoing in the country since the opposition challenged the results of the first democratic election in 2006 and started another civil war.

The Muslim minority has been in dire straits since the uprising affecting the eastern parts of the country, especially since 2010. Having been targeted by the government on account of accusations of collaborating with armed opposition groups, some Muslims have had to flee their homes and migrate to other regions. The existence of armed groups from the Muslim minority, such as the *Allied Democratic Forces of Islam (ADF-Nalu)*, who have been involved in the events, has brought misery upon ordinary Muslims, despite their disengagement from the conflict. While mosques in the country have become a target for attacks, the problem of security still waits to be solved. Involved in this war that has been waged by the West in the name of combating global terrorism, *ADF-Nalu*, which has been accused of being the al-Qaeda of central Africa, is said to have connections not only in the DRC, but in Uganda, Kenya, and Somalia, too. This accusation affects the whole Muslim minority in the country.

Nevertheless, the situation of the Muslim minority living in the capital city of Kinshasa and in other urban centers seems unaffected that of the war-torn areas. Urban centers, where the central authority is powerful, are the primary destinations of migrants.

Internal tensions resulting from the difference of tribal allegiance or political tendency are the main obstacle to a solidarity between Muslims living in different regions of the country. Experiencing all the ethnic conflicts facing the people of Africa, Muslims here sometimes confront one another on different sides of the conflict.

Despite making up a considerable part of the population, Muslim representation in the country is virtually non-existent. Of the 450 MPs in parliament, only three are there to represent the Muslim minority.

However, if representation was given in proportion relation to their numbers, there would need to be at least 65-70 Muslim MPs. The representation crisis in parliament is visible at other levels of government. Representatives of the Muslim minority have no say either in the government or at a bureaucratic level. Furthermore, they have not even obtained the status of an officially-recognized minority.

The Muslims in the country also experience a significant level of educational problems. As the majority of children come from low-income families, many of them have to drop out before finishing high school. There are 800 schools in the country owned by Muslims, 500 offering primary school education and 300 middle and high school education. Serving all Congolese children, not only Muslim ones, with the collaboration between the government and foreign NGOs, these institutions are considered to be one of the most important tools in the establishment of social peace. In these schools, where no ethnicity is promoted, it is easier to eradicate the prejudices schoolchildren inherit from their families.

The main obstacle to Muslims making such investments as establishing their own media outlets, higher education institutions, or hospitals is their very limited economic resources. Even though the DRC is the second most industrialized country in Africa and has some of the most significant mineral deposits in the world, one-third of the extracted diamonds are taken out of the country by illegal means. This is the country's most serious predicament.

While Sunnis make up the majority of the Muslims, there is a small Shiite minority located in the capital city of Kinshasa. The Ahmadiyya movement, which tries to present itself in an Islamic light, is also active in the country. The main potential for dissent among the Muslim minority in the Democratic Republic of the Congo lies in the ideological conflict between the traditional Sufi movements and Salafi movements.

This breach is a threat to the future of the Muslim minority, presenting the most serious risk of division and causing an inevitable amount of alienation with the added impact of the local young-old generation gap. While older generations have more Sufi tendencies, young people who are open to all ideological and sectarian movements in the world follow a different path, causing the major area of crisis; that which disrupts the integrity of the Muslim minority.

Surface area: 2,344,858 km²

Population: 77,433,744

Muslim population: 10-15%

Capital: Kinshasa

Official language: French