

Angolan Muslims

In the Muslim continent of Africa, Angola was the last country to come into contact with Islam. Angola is one of the most important diamond and oil-producing countries in the world and this draws investors and workers alike from all over the world, including Muslim countries. Muslims constitute approximately 3% of the country's population (approximately 80,000). The existence of the Muslims in Angola dates back to the migrant flow from outside the country during the industrial investments made especially in the colonial period. The majority of the Muslims in this country consists of Muslim workers who migrated to the country from Mali, Nigeria and Senegal due to economic reasons. On the other hand, the Muslims moving to Angola for investment purposes have generally come from Lebanon, India and Pakistan.

This demographic fact has become a motivation for alienation in recent years and the Muslims have been depicted as the aliens who were later on added to the Christian Catholic foundation of the country.

There are many factors that have led to the spread of Islam among the local groups of Angola. One of these naturally involves the efforts to proselytize Islam by some of the societies that have been established by Muslims. Another factor has been the conversion to Islam by those that left Angola and migrated to other countries during the civil war. The civil war that started in 1975 following the withdrawal of Portugal continued for 27 years and saw more than one million people lose their lives. Some of the hundreds of thousands of Angolan migrants escaping the raging war took shelter in areas inhabited by Muslims and some of these converted to Islam.

The third factor has been marriage. Marriage to Muslims has had an effect on the increase of the Muslim population in the country. The increase in the number of the Angolan women marrying the Muslim men coming to this country for employment or commercial purposes has reached such an extent, that it has been considered worrisome by the government.

According to Angolan law, a group needs at least 100,000 adult followers to be granted an official status as a religious society. According to the same law, the advocates of such a religion would be required to have a presence in at least 12 of the 18 states. The Muslims, a significant portion of whom consist of workers who have stayed in the country illegally, could not possibly apply for legal status.

Sources that state the real number of Muslims in the country to be at least six times that of current official records (approximately 500,000) indicate that the illegal workers avoid registration so as not to be deported from the country and therefore the number of Muslims in the country appears to be low. For this reason, Islam is not officially recognized in Angola and as such Muslims are not officially represented as a religious minority. Currently, the country has an autonomous office of Mufti established collectively by the imams who arrange the Muslims' religious affairs.

In spite of the wealth of available economic opportunities, Angola is one of the poorest countries in the world due to income injustices, smuggling, corruption and bribery. This injustice has led to huge income gaps. The country's Muslim minority includes both wealthy businessmen and migrant workers. For this reason, there is a huge difference between groups in the minority in social and economic terms as well.

In spite of the disadvantages they face, Angolan Muslims have been able to establish their own educational institutions. They have ensured the Islamic education of their children thanks to the societies and schools established. However, they still do not have qualified means of education that can ensure their representation in a powerful way.

Islam is viewed highly negatively in the country. The delay of the Muslims in establishing a local Islamic culture in the country plays a role in this, as well as the anti-Islamic media propaganda. The Angolan government believes that Islam is connected with terrorism and as such view all Muslims as first-degree suspects. This affects migrant workers, ordinary Angolan Muslims, as well as the Muslim businessmen who have large investments in the country.

The pressure on Muslims that increased in the aftermath of 9/11 has become an actual operation in the

form of attacks on mosques starting from 2006. While some mosques are locked down, others have been expropriated. Politicians do not miss any opportunity to denounce Islam as an official religion in the country based on the arrangements made regarding the legal status of religious congregations. The acts of suppression supported by Christians turned into a civil conflict between the Muslims and Christians in 2008.

The inciting speeches of Christian politicians and their discourse depicting Islam as a threat triggered new unrest in the country in 2009 and in 2010 some mosques were sabotaged. The official moves instigated in the aftermath of these events have accelerated since 2013 and more than 60 mosques have either been closed down or demolished. Currently, all but one of the 78 mosques across the country have been shut down.

Another intimidation ploy of the official authorities involves the delay in responding either positively or negatively to applications made by Muslims. Thanks to this approach tens of projects across the country are on hold. The proposition made by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to send an observer to the country in the face of the latest developments has gone unanswered.