



Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **91.1%**
- Christians : **5.2%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **3.3%**
- Others : **0.4%**

15.589.000

196.712 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Article 1 of the constitution of Senegal establishes a clear separation between the state and religious organisations.^[1] Article 24 guarantees religious communities the right to practise their religions freely and the right to manage and organise themselves.^[2]

Islam is the predominant religion.^[3] Most Muslims belong to Sufi brotherhoods concentrated in the northern part of the country, while most Christians, and Catholics in particular, live in the south-western part of Senegal. (During French colonisation in the 19th century, Catholic missionary work was confined to these regions, as Islam had not yet prevailed there. The aim was to maintain social peace).^[4] There are also some Protestants. Many Muslims and Christians mix their customs with traditional African rites. Most adherents of traditional African religions can be found in the south-east of the country.^[5]

Daily life in Senegal is traditionally characterised by a spirit of tolerance. In matters of family law, Muslims have the right to choose between *Shari'a* and civil law. Conversion is possible and is accepted.^[6] All religious groups must register with the authorities to obtain official recognition as an organisation. Successful registration is the prerequisite for an organisation wishing to conduct business, open bank accounts, own property, receive private financial support and avail itself of certain tax benefits.^[7]

The state seeks to achieve equal treatment in education as well. Up to four hours of (voluntary) religious instruction per week are offered in state-run primary schools and parents may opt for a Muslim or a Christian curriculum.^[8] In addition, there are schools sponsored by denominational entities and co-financed by the state if they meet the required educational standards. The majority of pupils attending Christian-sponsored schools are Muslim.^[9]

In 2016, the government of Senegal assisted some 1,500 Muslims with the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca by providing free flight tickets. Assistance was provided for Catholic pilgrimages to Rome and Israel as well.^[10]

The Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs require local or foreign religious groups to submit annual activity reports that include disclosure of financial transactions. The intention behind this is to identify financing of possible terrorist acts at an early stage. No cases of illegal activity in this regard came to light during the reporting period.^[11]

| Incidents

Christians are a respected minority in Senegal. Christian and Muslim holidays are often celebrated together by members of both faiths. Andre Gueye, Catholic Bishop of Thies, said: “We live together in friendship and harmony. Sure, sometimes we have problems with the Muslims – it’s like a married couple. But we try to solve them through dialogue.”^[12] Thomas Volk, a scholar of Islamic studies who manages the office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Senegal, views the situation similarly. He says: “The coexistence of religious groups is working thus far. Senegal is an excellent example of successful inter-religious dialogue.”^[13]

In spite of the climate of tolerance that prevails in the country, for several years there have been repeated cases of acts of profanation. An example in the current reporting period is the attack by unknown individuals on a church complex in Guédiawaye in early February 2018.^[14] The perpetrators destroyed a statue of Mary. At Mass the following Sunday, the priest had to appease angry churchgoers and warn against acts of revenge. A statement from the Minister of the Interior was read on television, describing the break-in at the church as a “disturbance of social peace” and an “attack on religious freedom”. The Senegalese army and police have recruited additional staff to protect against Islamist terrorist attacks.^[15]

The vast majority of believers in Senegal belong to one of the four large Sufi brotherhoods. They represent a peaceful Islam and traditionally concern themselves with the common good. One of the brotherhoods, for instance, organises the bus transport system in Dakar. The Sufi brotherhoods are viewed as a connecting bridge among the people and as a buffer against extremism.^[16]

Daesh (ISIS) militia have waged attacks on several Sufis in recent years. There are also increasing indications that stricter views of Islam are gaining a foothold in Senegal. For instance, increasingly, women are seen on the streets wearing complete veils. “Senegalese Muslims are under pressure from Saudi Arabia,” explains Thomas Volk.^[17] Saudi Arabia builds mosques, awards scholarships to young Senegalese people and sends imams to the country. Iran also conducts itself in a self-assured manner here and has just opened a small university in Dakar. Volk states: “We are often witness to the proxy debate between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia. But we are less aware of the fact that this debate can also occur in Africa.”

During the reporting period, a group of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) drew attention to cases of abuse in traditional *Qur’an* schools known as ‘Daaras’.^[18] At these schools, it is reported, children are subject to physical and sexual abuse and have been forced to work as beggars. The NGOs called on the government to improve controls of the *Qur’an* schools and prosecute those who have committed abuse. In July 2016, the government began implementing a 2005 law banning begging by children, a widespread phenomenon in Senegal.^[19]

| Prospects for freedom of religion

Extremist currents have existed in Senegal since the 1950s when new, strict approaches to religion, influenced by Saudi Arabia, began to emerge.^[20] Whereas Wahhabists and Salafists coexisted in peace with traditional Sufi brotherhoods in the past, fears of radicalisation by forces beyond Senegal are now apparently on the rise. While there have been no major acts of violence to date, some view the attacks against Christian institutions and Christian symbols as worrying

evidence of radicalisation among Muslims.^[21]

The realities on the ground seem to justify some of the concern. According to observers, more and more young Senegalese are opting to attend *Qur'an* schools or the Arabic university.^[22] A negative consequence of this is fewer opportunities in the labour market, where French skills are often a prerequisite.^[23] For some years it has been noticed that an increasing number of young people do not want to join the traditional Sufi brotherhoods. Instead, they feel attracted to Islamists, who also offer them a social network.

Many say religious radicalisation of young people is linked to increasing poverty levels in the country.^[24] This not only drives many young Senegalese into the clutches of radical forces but also gives them reason to flee to Europe. Senegal ranks fourth among sub-Saharan African countries, and first in West Africa, in terms of the numbers of emigrants. According to official estimates, more than 400,000 Senegalese emigrated in 2011 alone. If illegal emigration were factored in, this figure would probably be twice, perhaps even three times higher.^[25] It is a vicious circle. The flight by large numbers of young, often well-trained, employees weakens the traditionally moderate religious communities (no matter whether Muslim or Christian). This makes these communities more vulnerable to radical and violent forces, which in many cases redoubles the desire to emigrate.

That is why there is reason to believe that successful measures to combat poverty and a lack of prospects for the future would also help stem the risks posed by Islamist jihadism in West Africa. There must be an effective effort to combat corruption and nepotism in government and other organisations. There is also a need to develop infrastructure. Finally, it will be necessary to continue to move beyond obsolete economic structures, many of which date back to the colonial era, such as the concentration on peanut farming which is often environmentally harmful and heavily dependent upon the world market.^[26]

The success of the effort to combat jihadism in Senegal's neighbouring countries is also particularly important. Mali, which borders directly onto Senegal, is particularly important. Given the violence committed by followers of Al-Qaeda and the Daesh in Mali, Senegal is facing growing concerns about the possibility of an assault by extremist forces. Many Senegalese are alarmed by the presence of many radicalised young people from Senegal within the ranks of Daesh in Libya.^[27] In January 2017 there was a sign of moderation in Gambia, a country surrounded almost entirely by Senegal. The newly elected Gambian president, Adama Barrow, overturned the decision by his predecessor, long-time dictatorial leader Yahya Jammeh, to declare Gambia an Islamic republic.^[28] Before Jammeh declared Gambia an Islamic republic (Africa's second after Mauritania) in 2015, the former British colony had been a secular state.^[29]

Endnotes / Sources

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[5] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom – Senegal, loc. cit.

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[14] 'Senegal: Angriff auf Kirche', Vatican News, 6th February 2018, <https://www.vaticannews.va/de/kirche/news/2018-02/senegal-islam-christentum-kirche-angriff.html>, (accessed on 30th March 2018).

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[28] Sridharan, Vasudevan: Adama Barrow removes 'Islamic' from The Gambia's official name, International Business times UK, 30th January 2017, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/adama-barrow-removes-islamic-gambias-official-name-1603686>, (accessed on 30th March 2018), and Munzinger Archiv 2018, Munzinger Länder: Gambia. www.munzinger.de/search/login (accessed on 30th March 2018).

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