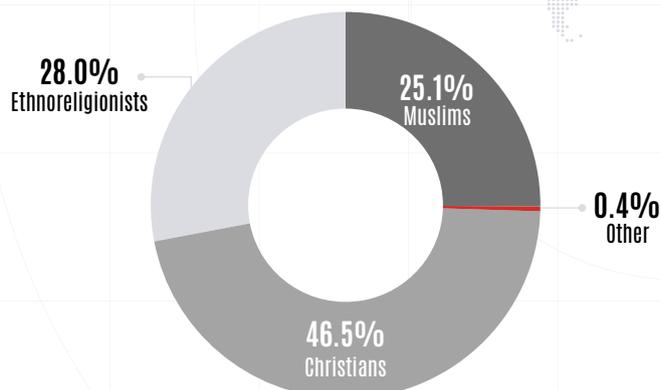




# BENIN

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The country's constitution defines Benin as a secular state that prohibits religious discrimination.<sup>1</sup> Religious freedom is enshrined as a fundamental human right and a core principle for interreligious relations. Political parties are constitutionally required to respect the secular nature of the state in their actions and initiatives. The constitution goes further, noting that "the secularity of the State may not be made the object of a revision" (Article 156).<sup>2</sup>

People who wish to establish a religious community must register with the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>3</sup> If a religious group fails to do so, the authorities will close down its facilities until proper registration has been completed.

The law also prohibits religious instruction in public schools under the country's constitutional principle of separation of state and religion.

Benin is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the region. The state has traditionally respected this pluralism. Relations between religious communities have been peaceful. More than a quarter of the population hold ethnoreligious beliefs, a widespread practice in West Africa. Muslims and Catholics are roughly equal, about 25

per cent each.<sup>4</sup> A small section of the population belongs to the Celestial Church of Christ, a Christian community whose teachings are strictly based on the Bible. Founded in 1947 in Benin, it is also present in several other West African countries. In practice, there is a great deal of overlap among the different denominations. Some Christians and Muslims also practise voodoo, although not always openly.

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

For several years, Benin has been subject to growing threats from Islamic extremists.<sup>5</sup> Even though no major attacks have been perpetrated within the country itself, Jihadi terrorist groups are causing increasing concern,

The extremists' Islamist ideology is new to the country. There is no tradition of religious extremism in Benin itself, either in terms of legislation or religious practice in the population.

Benin's tradition of peaceful interreligious relations did not change during the reporting period, and no acts of religiously motivated violence were reported.

However, the parliamentary elections held on the 28th April 2019 have led to political and social instability. Oppo-

sition candidates were excluded from the elections due to the introduction of “new rules that classed opposition candidates as ineligible”.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, voters could only choose between two parties allied with President Patrice Talon on the ballot paper. Important demonstrations took place in several cities before, during and after the elections, and voter turnout was very low (23 per cent) due to the call for a boycott by opposition parties. The Catholic Church, through the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Benin, condemned the violence and acted as a mediator between the government and opposition groups.<sup>7</sup>

Five years ago, Benin used to be a model of a multiparty democracy in Africa. The shift towards a more authoritarian system is a more recent phenomenon<sup>8</sup> with the introduction of new electoral rules by President Talon (in power since 2016), which makes opposition practically impossible. Nonetheless, these incidents were not related to inter-religious relations nor did they affect the right of religious freedom in the country.

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The positive state of religious freedom is most likely to re-

main as it is, at least in the near future, with good interreligious relations. No major changes or widespread violence is expected.

It remains to be seen however whether the aforementioned political changes and resulting social instability will have any impact on the practice of religion. The increasing presence of jihadist armed groups in West Africa too could potentially threaten the climate of religious tolerance in the country.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) has reported that Benin’s northern neighbour, Burkina Faso, is becoming a “launching pad for [terrorist] operations further south,”<sup>9</sup> including Benin. As the ICG notes “for the past several years, armed groups active in the Sahel have referred in their declarations to the destabilisation of countries in the Gulf of Guinea”.<sup>10</sup> In a video released in early November 2018, three leaders of an al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist group urged the Fulani people living in the Sahel and West Africa to engage in the jihad in countries like “Senegal, Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Cameroon”.<sup>11</sup>

## SOURCES / ENDNOTES

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- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.