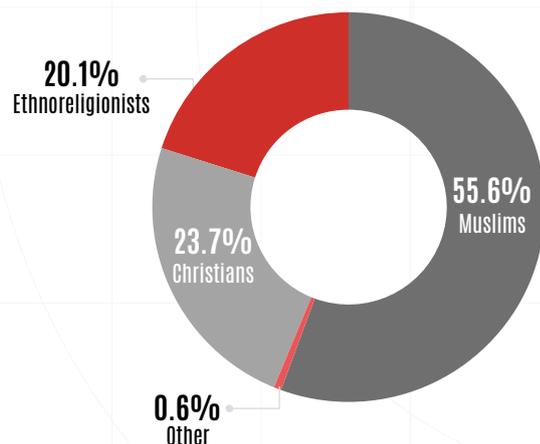




BURKINA FASO

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

According to its constitution, the Republic of Burkina Faso is a secular state that grants no privileges to any religious denomination and guarantees its citizens freedom of religion.¹ Article 1 prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion. Article 7 guarantees freedom of religion. Article 23 defines the family as the “basic unit of society” and bans discrimination on the basis of religion, “in matters of marriage”, which must be based “on the free consent” of the spouses.

Like many other nations in the region of West Africa, Burkina Faso is characterised by great religious diversity. The country’s various religious communities, predominantly Muslim and Christian, have traditionally maintained good relations with one another.² Religious communities can register with the authorities through the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, which oversees religious affairs, but they are not obliged to do so. Registration is subject to the same legal requirements as those that apply to other registered organisations.³

Because of the state’s neutrality, religious instruction is

not permitted in state-run schools, nevertheless, there are Muslim, Catholic and Protestant primary and secondary schools. Educational institutions have free reign in personnel matters, although the appointment of school heads must be reported to the authorities.⁴ The state reviews the curricula of schools sponsored by religious communities with an eye to their religious orientation and their compliance with technical specifications. In the case of Qur’anic schools, state control is not particularly effective since many of them are not registered.⁵

The Muslim, Catholic, Protestant and animist communities each receive government subsidies of around US\$ 129,000 per year.⁶ Support is also offered for a variety of religiously oriented programs and projects which, in the view of the state, serve the common good or are in the national interest.⁷ Under an agreement concluded in September 2020 between the Republic of Burkina Faso and the Holy See, the Catholic Church and its institutions in Burkina Faso are subject to public law.⁸ The treaty also governs cooperation between state and Church institutions.⁹

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Islam in Burkina Faso has historically, as in many African

countries, generally been characterised as moderate with Christians and Muslims sharing good inter-religious relationships. Since the end of 2015, however, the country has, like in other parts of West Africa, become a hotspot for violent extremists.¹⁰ The militants - first identified with the homegrown Ansaroul Islam in 2016 - have expanded to include the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) and the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM - affiliated with the transnational Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM) entering from neighbouring Mali into northern Burkina Faso and then gaining influence in the country's western, central, and eastern regions.¹¹ Spurred by preachers adhering to an ideology of Salafi Jihadism, the extremists, mainly Burkinabè fighters pursuing local interests¹², target state authorities, military and police, as well as civilians including village leaders, teachers - threatened because of the secular curriculum, Muslim and Christian leadership, and faithful. As indicated in a February 2020 International Crisis Group report, "militants extend their reach notably by exploiting local conflicts that are linked to the multifaceted rural crisis and often involve self-defence groups", with insurgents including farmers and mainly Fulani herders "who are victims of land-related injustices or racketeering, bandits who bring experience in weaponry and fighting, gold miners seeking protection, and stigmatised populations."¹³ The cycle of violence is exacerbated with the response by village self-defence groups, in the local Mossi language called Koglweogo ("guardians of the bush").¹⁴

The terror has provoked a wave of internally displaced persons (IDPs) seeking shelter and safety. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported in February 2020 that 765,000 people in Burkina Faso had been displaced by terrorist groups, up from 65,000 12 months before.¹⁵ Those affected include at least 70,000 Christians, though over 90 percent of IDPs in the most affected areas, are Muslim.¹⁶ IDPs told the UNHCR that militant groups attacked their villages, looted their homes, raping and killing inhabitants. Out of fear, "the residents left everything behind in search of shelter."¹⁷ To make matters worse, the country was hit by major flooding in the wake of severe rainfall in August 2020. At present, it is estimated that some 3.5 million people are internally displaced.¹⁸

The most notable attack in 2018 was the 2nd March targeting by militants of the military headquarters and the French Embassy in Ouagadougou killing at least eight security force members.

In 2019, there were more jihadist attacks in Burkina Faso than any other country of the Sahel.¹⁹

On 1st January 2019, ethnic Mossi villagers in Yirgou attacked Fulani herders killing 39 in apparent retaliation for an attack by suspected jihadists killing seven people in Yirgou on 31st December 2018.²⁰

Christian faithful and churches became specific targets of violence for the first time in 2019 with concerns that this was the introduction of a wider a jihadist strategy to provoke greater religious and inter-communal conflict.²¹ Six of Burkina Faso's 15 Catholic dioceses are currently affected by religion-based terror.²²

On 15th February 2019, Fr. Antonio César Fernández, a Salesian missionary from Spain, was murdered in the central eastern region²³ in a jihadist attack some 40 kilometres from Burkina Faso's southern border. On that same day, four Burkinabé customs officers were killed in an attack at the Nouhao customs post near the borders with Ghana and Togo.²⁴

On 28th April 2019, unidentified militants attacked a Protestant church in Silgadji village. Two church leaders and four worshippers were killed, and others kidnapped.²⁵

On 12th May 2019, Fr. Siméon Yampa was murdered along with five worshippers while celebrating Sunday Mass in the community of Dablo, Sanmatenga province. A day later, armed men intercepted Catholic residents during a Marian procession in Singa, a village in Zimtenga department (district) in the north-central part of the country. After letting the children go free, the attackers murdered four adults and destroyed the Marian statue taken on procession.²⁶

On 13th May 2019, at the funeral for the Dablo victims, Archbishop Séraphin François Rouamba of Koupéla, President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Burkina Faso and Niger, repeated his calls for peaceful coexistence.²⁷ Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and representatives of tribal religions were in attendance at the funeral.

Following the attacks on Catholic churchgoers on 12th and 13th May, the Bishops of West Africa (RECOWA-CERAO) issued a press release after their third Plenary Assembly meeting in Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou.²⁸ "We condemn this disturbing wave of violence that affects not

only Burkina Faso, but also Niger, Mali and Nigeria, and would like to express our solidarity and extend our prayers and sympathy to our brothers and sisters who have been affected by violence.”²⁹

On 26th May 2019, a Catholic church in Touffé, a village near Titao, the capital of the northern province of Loroum, was attacked during Sunday Mass. At around 9 am, eight heavily armed men on four motorcycles drove into the village. They entered the church where the Catholic community had gathered to celebrate Holy Mass and fired into the crowd. Three people were killed instantly, and the fourth later succumbed to his severe injuries. Numerous worshippers were injured in the attack.³⁰

On 4th June 2019, the Archbishop and Grand Imam of Ouagadougou joined in common prayers for peace in the capital’s Place de la Nation on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr. On this occasion, Prime Minister Christophe Dabire stated: “I am convinced that with the Muslim brothers who have continued to pray for this country, that they will continue to do so in order for our lives, which were threatened by terrorists, by the fragmenting of social cohesion, so our country can find calm and serenity once more for the greater happiness of the children of Burkina Faso.”³¹

According to UNICEF, as of August 2019, terrorist violence forced the closure “of 2,024 schools depriving more than 330,000 children of education.”³² Fr. Marco Prada noted that the conflict in the border regions between Burkina Faso and Mali and Niger, was having devastating consequences on the educational system, causing it to completely collapse and forcing hundreds of thousands of people to flee the “burning north” for the relative safety of the south.³³

As reported by Aid to the Church in Need, targeted attacks were also carried out against the Christian inhabitants of two villages in early September 2019. According to eyewitness accounts, 16 men “waited until the residents returned from their work in the fields. Some of the terrorists forced the people into the church and threatened them. Meanwhile, their accomplices burnt down houses and stables.”³⁴

More than 2,000 inhabitants fled after Islamist extremists, going from village to village, issued an ultimatum: either convert to Islam or leave. According to local sources, the terrorists killed individual community members and

threatened the bereaved that they would return in three days. If Christians were still found upon return, they too would be killed.³⁵

On 11th October 2019, armed extremists attacked the Grand Mosque in the town of Salmossi killing 16 worshippers at prayer. On the following day, about 1,000 protesters marched in the capital Ouagadougou “to denounce terrorism and the presence of foreign military bases in Africa.”³⁶

On 1st December 2019, Islamists attacked a Protestant church in Hantoukoura, Komandjarie province, in the east of the country near the border with Niger.³⁷ Security services reported that around a dozen armed men stormed the church executing 14 people, including children and the pastor of the congregation, and leaving many injured. Soldiers pursued the attackers who fled the scene on motorcycles.

On 10th February 2020, seven people were abducted from a priest’s home in the city of Sebba, Yagha province, in the northeast of the country. The bodies of five of the abductees were discovered three days later.³⁸ A second assault, recorded as the worst jihadist attack against Christians thus far, was carried out on 16th February 2020 in the village of Pansi, where armed men opened fire at people attending a Christian interfaith meeting; approximately 24 were killed, 18 seriously injured, and 20 were abducted.³⁹ According to the governor of the region, the local Protestant pastor and a Catholic catechist were among the dead. The UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, strongly condemned the attack, reiterating, “the UN’s commitment to support Burkina Faso in its efforts to fight violent extremism and terrorism and create the conditions for sustainable peace and development.”⁴⁰

On 15th August 2020, the Grand Imam Souaibou Cissé, seen as a moderate religious leader recognised for his interfaith work, was found assassinated in Tiléré (Soum province) having been abducted by unidentified gunmen on 11th August.⁴¹

According to the country’s National Council for Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation (CONASUR) findings, in August 2020, more than a million people were internally displaced by the upsurge in violence in Burkina Faso. “This figure represents a 100 per cent increase compared to early 2020, when Burkina Faso counted some 450,000 internally

displaced persons.”⁴²

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 exacerbated the impact of Islamist terrorist activities in the Sahel region. According to a 1st May 2020 report by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), “violent attacks in the region’s hotspots rose by 37 percent between mid-March and mid-April.”⁴³ Not only did terrorists take advantage of the confusion to increase attacks, the effectiveness of military response was reduced as governments redeployed troops from rural areas to deal with the pandemic crisis in urban areas.⁴⁴ Additionally social and economic restrictions imposed to contain the epidemic resulted in increased poverty, food shortages⁴⁵ and a drop in educational opportunities. To compound matters, the world-wide attention on COVID-19 diverted international interest in Islamist terror in West Africa with violence in Burkina Faso continuing largely underreported.

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

“Burkina Faso has become the main theatre for jihadist operations in the Sahel”⁴⁶ states a February 2020 International Crisis Group report. Key reasons why jihadist groups are able to recruit fighters in Burkina Faso include multiple and complex underlying social factors such as poverty, corruption, weak state structures, disenfranchised youth and pre-existing intercommunal violence over land rights between pastoralists and farmers. These factors are exacerbated by the consequences of climate change. Authorities, focusing on counter-terrorism (reportedly thwarting several attacks but also often resulting in abuse against civilians)⁴⁷, have been slow in recognising the scale of the extremist crisis, and unable to address the underlying problems which sustain the frustration, and jihadist recruiting opportunities.

Fuel to the fire is the arms trade. Cardinal Ouédraogo, Archbishop of Ouagadougou stated: “Who is arming all these killers? Who? Who gives them the weapons? We do not have an answer, but we see the damage being done!”⁴⁸

Although Burkina Faso’s religious and political leaders seek to maintain the historically positive inter-religious relations between faith groups, and with the understanding that Islamist terror affects all religious communities in Burkina Faso, there are concerns to the long-term impact of the jihadist violence and its role in further dividing Burkinabe

society.

In view of the current situation, the prospects for freedom of religion in Burkina Faso remain negative for the foreseeable future.

- 1 I Burkina Faso 1991 (rev. 2015), Constitute Project, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Burkina_Faso_2015?lang=en (accessed 30th January 2021).
- 2 “Burkina Faso,” Munzinger Archiv 2020, <https://www.munzinger.de/search/document?index=mol-03&id=03000HVO000&type=text/html&query.key=IMrLJEdT&template=/publikationen/laender/document.jsp&preview=> (accessed 27th September 2020).
- 3 Office of International Religious Freedom, “Burkina Faso,” 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Burkina Faso, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/burkina-faso/> (accessed 30th January 2021).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 “Agreement between Holy See and Burkina Faso comes into effect,” Vatican News, 7th September 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2020-09/agreement-between-holy-see-and-burkina-faso-goes-into-effect.html> (accessed 4th October 2020).
- 9 “Ratifizierungsurkunden überreicht,” DomRadio, 7th September 2020, <https://www.domradio.de/themen/vatikan/2020-09-07/ratifizierungsurkunden-ueberreicht-grundlagenabkommen-zwischen-vatikan-und-burkina-faso-kraft> (accessed 4th October 2020).
- 10 Oliver Maksan, “Burkina Faso: Christen leiden unter islamistischen Terror,” Die Tagespost, 13th March 2020, <https://www.die-tagespost.de/politik/aktuell/Burkina-Faso-Christen-leiden-unter-islamistischem-Terror;art315,206220> (accessed 27th September 2020).
- 11 “Burkina Faso: New Massacres by Islamist Armed Groups”, Human Rights Watch, 23rd April 2020; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/23/burkina-faso-new-massacres-islamist-armed-groups>.
- 12 “Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence”, Africa Report N°287, International Crisis Group, 24th February 2020, <https://www.crisis-group.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/287-burkina-faso-sortir-de-la-spirale-des-violences>.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 “In 12 months Sahel violence displaces more than 700,000 in Burkina Faso,” UNHCR 2020, 21st February 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2020/2/5e4fa0204/12-months-sahel-violence-displaces-700000-burkina-faso.html?query=burkina%20faso%20700,000> (accessed 27th September 2020).
- 16 Maksan, op. cit.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 “UNHCR assisting displaced families affected by floods in the Sahel,” UNHCR, 24th September 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/9/5f6b79f44/unhcr-assisting-displaced-families-affected-floods-sahel.html> (accessed 27th September 2020).
- 19 “Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence”, op. cit.
- 20 “Burkina Faso’s war against militant Islamists”, BBC News, 30th May 2019; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39279050>
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Maksan, op. cit.
- 23 “The Rector Major of the Salesians: ‘May the blood of Fr. Antonio César be the seed of Christians, faithful followers of Jesus, and of young vocations at the service of the Kingdom’,” Agenzia Fides, 19th February 2019, http://www.fides.org/en/news/65583-AFRICA_BURKINA_FASO_The_Rector_Major_of_the_Salesians_May_the_blood_of_Fr_Antonio_Cesar_be_the_seed_of_Christians_faithful_followers_of_Jesus_and_of_young_vocations_at_the_service_of_the_Kingdom (accessed 3rd October 2020).
- 24 “Burkina Faso: cinq morts dont un prêtre espagnol, dans l’attaque d’un poste de douane,” RFI, 16th February 2019, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20190216-burkina-faso-cinq-morts-attaque-poste-douane> (accessed 30th January 2021).
- 25 Office of International Religious Freedom, “Burkina Faso” op., cit.
- 26 “Four more Burkina Faso Catholics killed in new attack,” Catholic News Agency, 16th May 2019, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/four-more-burkina-faso-catholics-killed-in-new-attack-12290> (accessed 3rd October 2020).
- 27 “Another attack against Catholics: 4 faithful killed at the end of a procession; statue of the Virgin destroyed,” Agenzia Fides, 14th May 2019, http://www.fides.org/en/news/66026-AFRICA_BURKINA_FASO_Another_attack_against_Catholics_4_faithful_killed_at_the_end_of_a_procession_statue_of_the_Virgin_destroyed (accessed 3rd October 2020).
- 28 “Peace and immigration at the center of the attention of the Bishops of West Africa,” Agenzia Fides, 22nd May 2019, http://www.fides.org/en/news/66070-AFRICA_BURKINA_FASO_Peace_and_immigration_at_the_center_of_the_attention_of_the_Bishops_of_West_Africa (accessed 3rd October 2020).
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 “Another attack on a Catholic church: 4 faithful killed during Sunday mass; statue of the Virgin destroyed” op.cit.
- 31 “Burkinbe Archbishop joins Eid prayers to foster unity against terrorists”, Africa News, 5th June 2019; <https://www.africanews.com/2019/06/05/burkinbe-archbishop-joins-eid-prayers-to-foster-unity-against-terrorists>
- 32 Office of International Religious Freedom, “Burkina Faso” op. cit.
- 33 “The drama of children left without school, between violence and poverty,” Agenzia Fides, 15th July 2020, http://www.fides.org/en/news/68354-AFRICA_BURKINA_FASO_The_drama_of_children_left_without_school_between_violence_and_poverty (accessed 3rd October 2020).
- 34 “Burkina Faso: Christen werden aus Dörfern vertrieben,” Kirche in Not Deutschland, 19th September 2020, <https://www.kirche-in-not.de/allgemein/aktuelles/burkina-faso-christen-werden-aus-doerfern-vertrieben/> (accessed 3rd October 2020).

- 35 Ibid.
- 36 “Burkina Faso Mosque Attack Claims 16”, VOA News, 12th October 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/burkina-faso-mosque-attack-claims-16>
- 37 “At least 14 killed in attack on Burkina Faso church,” Reuters News, 1st December 2019, <https://news.trust.org/item/20191201185836-p6kfx> (accessed 3rd October 2020).
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 “A catechist killed in the north of the Country. Out of 6 parishes in the diocese of Dori, 3 are closed due to terrorism,” Agenzia Fides, 20th February 2020, http://www.fides.org/en/news/67431-AFRICA_BURKINA_FASO_A_catechist_killed_in_the_north_of_the_Country_Out_of_6_parishes_in_the_diocese_of_Dori_3_are_closed_due_to_terrorism (accessed 3rd October 2020); Devin Watkins, “Burkina Faso: Gunmen on motorbikes kill 20 civilians, Vatican News, 3rd February 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2020-02/burkina-faso-gunmen-kill-civilians-sahel.html> (accessed 28th March 2020).
- 40 “UN chief, Security Council, strongly condemn Burkina Faso terrorist attacks”, UN News, 3rd March 2018; <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/03/1004032>.
- 41 “Grand imam of Djibo, Burkina Faso: Found dead after kidnapped”, Anadolu Agency, 19th August 2020; <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/profile-grand-imam-of-djibo-burkina-faso-found-dead-after-kidnapped/1947225>.
- 42 «Enregistrement des personnes déplacées internes du Burkina Faso», International Organization for Migration, 24th August 2020, <https://rodakar.iom.int/node/4971>.
- 43 “Extremist Groups Stepping up Operations during the Covid-19 Outbreak in Sub-Saharan Africa”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1st May 2020; <https://www.csis.org/analysis/extremist-groups-stepping-operations-during-covid-19-outbreak-sub-saharan-africa>.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 “Burkina Faso: Over 535,000 children under five ‘acutely’ malnourished,” United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, 7th September 2020, <https://unric.org/en/burkina-faso-over-535000-children-under-five-acutely-malnourished/> (accessed 3rd October 2020).
- 46 “Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence”, op. cit.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Françoise Niamien and Stefan von Kempis, “Terror in Burkina Faso: Gespräch mit Kardinal Ouédraogo,” Vatican News, 3rd December 2019, <https://www.vaticannews.va/de/welt/news/2019-12/terror-burkina-faso-attentate-christen-islamisten-kardinal-sahel.html> (accessed 3rd October 2020).