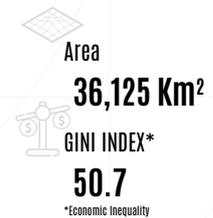
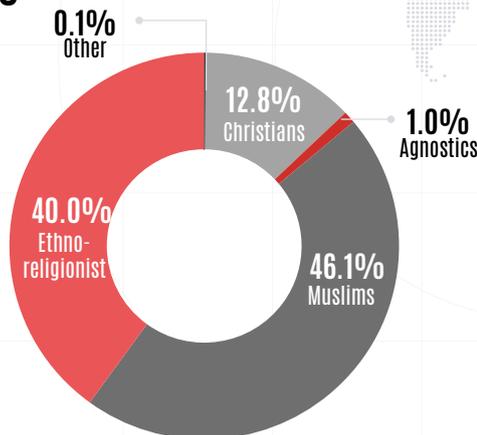




GUINEA-BISSAU

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Guinea-Bissau is ethnically and religiously very diverse. According to Article 1 of its constitution, it is a “sovereign, democratic, secular and unitary republic”¹. Article 4 (Section 4) and Article 45 (Section 3) respectively prohibit political parties and labour unions from identifying with any Church, religion, cult, or religious doctrine. Although the constitutional text affirms that freedom of religion and conscience are inviolable, Article 30 (Section 2) allows the state to suspend or limit “fundamental rights, liberties and guarantees” in case of a state of emergency. Article 24 clearly states that all citizens are equal before the law, with the same rights and duties, without distinctions of any type (including religion). Religious groups must be licensed by the Ministry of Justice and these then receive tax exemptions.²

Church and state are separate in the former Portuguese colony. While religious groups can teach their faith and some have some private schools, religious instruction is not allowed in public schools.³ Despite political instability and widespread poverty, religious tensions have been

minimal for decades.

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

There have been no significant developments with regard to religious freedom during the reported period but tension is growing. Some jihadi terrorist groups have recently become increasingly involved in illegal activities. On 4th September 2019, local police seized more than 1.8 tonnes of cocaine purportedly smuggled by al-Qaeda.⁴ West Africa is suffering from an increased presence of Islamist terrorist groups.⁵ Consequently, the Regional Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Francophone West Africa, which includes the bishops of Guinea-Bissau, issued a joint pastoral message on 22nd May 2019. In it, the prelates denounced the “disquieting wave of violence”⁶ faced by the region and local Christian communities, and called on all religious leaders to “rise together to denounce any instrumentalization of religion.”⁷

Politically, the country has faced a major crisis since President José Mário Vaz sacked Prime Minister Domingos Simoes Pereira in 2015, leaving the country divided.⁸ Presidential elections were held on 24th November 2019. Bishop Pedro Carlos Zilli of Bafatá called on the govern-

ment and opposition groups to engage in dialogue. Bishop Camnate Na Bissign of Bissau said Bissau-Guineans deserve peace, stability and security.⁹ A former Prime Minister, Umaro Sissoco Embaló of the Madem G15 party, won the second round of voting after a controversial election. The new president was accepted in late February 2020.¹⁰ Embaló, a Muslim, is married to a Christian woman.¹¹

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Civil justice and fundamental rights suffer in an atmosphere like the one currently observed in Guinea-Bissau. Religious freedom too is at risk. The new government is unlikely to bring stability to a country that has been politically unstable since its independence. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Guinea-Bissau lacks the resources to counter the increased threat of terrorism and organised crime,¹² and

such threats can be expected to increase. Jihadi terrorist and criminal groups have taken advantage of the political instability and the weakness of the state to easily move in and out of the country. Some reports point to links between local and regional militant groups.¹³ As a local senior intelligence official put it, “Because of its [political] fragility, [Guinea-Bissau] is easy to penetrate. People can stay unnoticed for a long time”.¹⁴ Jihadi terrorist groups thus far have used the country for logistical and financial purposes only, while drug traffickers use it for transnational shipments. So far though, there have been no reports of violence or intimidation towards non-Muslim communities, but it remains to be seen if the growing radical Islamist presence will change that.

SOURCES / ENDNOTES

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