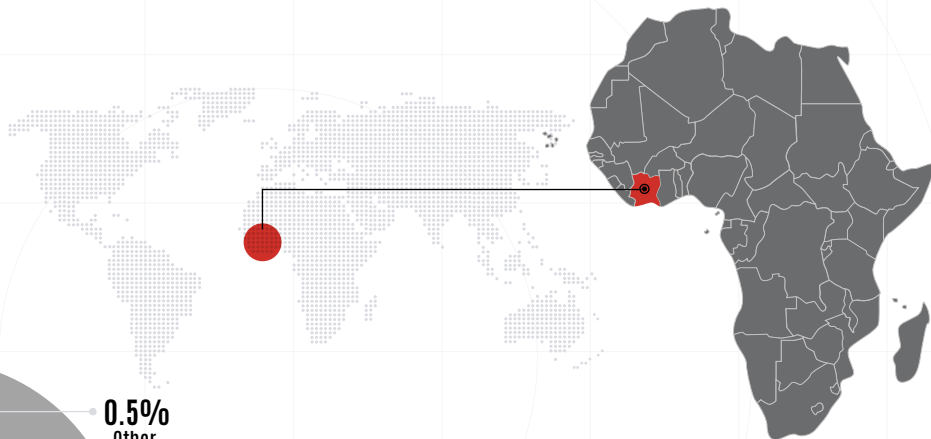
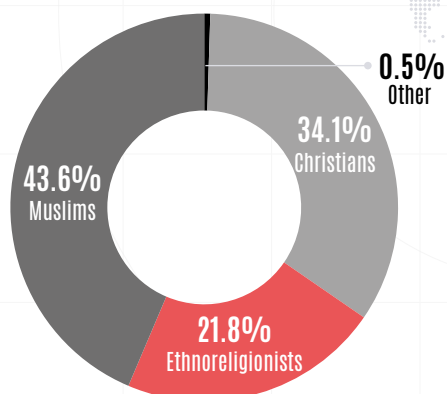


IVORY COAST

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Republic of the Ivory Coast (officially Côte d'Ivoire) is home to around 70 different ethnic groups.¹ Religious affiliation is divided between traditional African religions, which still have many followers, Islam and Christianity. Islam shapes the lives of a large part of the population in and from the north of the country, as well as immigrants from neighbouring countries. The umbrella organisation of Ivorian Muslims is the National Islamic Council of Ivory Coast (Conseil National Islamique de Côte d'Ivoire). The majority of Christians live in the south. Abidjan, Bouaké, Gagnoa and Korhogo are the seats of Catholic archdioceses.²

The country has faced significant political strife in its recent past - notably a protracted civil war between 2002 and 2007.³ The conflict's consequences - forced displacement and violence - were still being felt during the reporting period.⁴

Despite the country's ethnic and religious diversity, Christians and Muslims have traditionally lived side by side in peace. Consequently, violence is more likely to

be seen as a symptom of political division, abject poverty - more than 40% live below the poverty line - and a lack of employment opportunities⁵.

A new constitution came into effect on 8 November 2016.⁶ Article 49 states, "The Republic of Côte d'Ivoire is one and indivisible, secular, democratic and social."⁷ This has remained unchanged from previous versions. Freedom of religion is among the civil liberties guaranteed under Article 4. The constitution prohibits political parties "along regional, religious, tribal, ethnic or racial lines"⁸ (Article 25).

Traditionally, the country's many religious communities have lived side by side amicably. For a country with many ethnic and religious groups, this is a basic requirement for peace. During the reporting period, the Ivorian government continued to subsidise pilgrimages to Mecca for Muslims as well as to Lourdes (France) and Israel for Christians.⁹

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Ivorian Catholic authorities have drawn attention to a number of anti-Catholic acts of violence. In July 2019, a statue of the Virgin Mary in Grand-Yapo was decapi-

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tated. A similar incident occurred at a shrine in Abidjan the following month.¹⁰ The secretary of a parish priest, Mrs Faustine Brou, was “stabbed to death” in her office at the St Cecile’s Catholic Church in Abidjan.¹¹ No group or organisation has claimed responsibility for the attack, but the alleged perpetrators of the murder have been arrested and the case is under investigation. It is not yet clear if a contract killing or if religion was a motive, though after the incident Catholic and government authorities increased security in the parishes.

On 4 July 2018, authorities in Abidjan arrested a Muslim preacher, Aguib Touré, for two videos he posted online. In one he urges Muslims not to enrol their children in Christian schools. In the other, he complains about the high cost of Hajj and of the destruction of the homes of the poor “to give land to the rich”.¹² He was charged “for alleged acts of terrorism, incitement to hatred, xenophobia, [and] civil disobedience,” but was later released on 6 August 2018. An evangelical preacher was also arrested on 1 August 2018 for “xenophobic and tribalistic messages” but was released five days later when the president granted him an amnesty.¹³

On 11 June 2020, at least a dozen Ivorian soldiers died in a jihadist attack in the north of the country.¹⁴ This was the second significant assault after the Grand Bassam attack in March 2016, but the first in the country’s section of the Sahel, an area where terrorist groups have been operating for nine years, a sign of rising jihadist activity in the southern Sahel.

The Ivory Coast continued to suffer from interethnic violence in 2019.¹⁵ Clashes are often linked to “land ownership and transport”.¹⁶ Municipal elections in October 2018 were marked by violence, and many people fear that upcoming presidential elections in October 2020 could cause further tensions between ethnic groups. Due to the tense political situation, the country’s Catholic bishops called for a National Week of “Reconciliation” ahead of the vote.¹⁷ In a statement on 24 June 2019, the bishops warned against “a climate of widespread fear among the population in the Ivory Coast; fear linked to the recurrence of conflicts between communities or land occupation, the illegal occupation of forests and widespread insecurity.”¹⁸

Religious activities resumed on 17 May 2020 after two months of lockdown imposed to contain the COVID 19 virus.¹⁹

Historically good relations should ensure that the Ivory Coast’s various religious communities continue to live together amicably for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, the country continues to be threatened by jihadist groups who are increasing their activity in the wider West African region, as evidenced by the June 2020 attack.

Political tensions are also rising in the country ahead of the 31 October 2020 presidential elections, especially since the death of Prime Minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly on 8 July 2020. In this regard, Ivorian bishops in late July 2020 issued a statement stressing the need for justice, peace and reconciliation in the country.²⁰

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