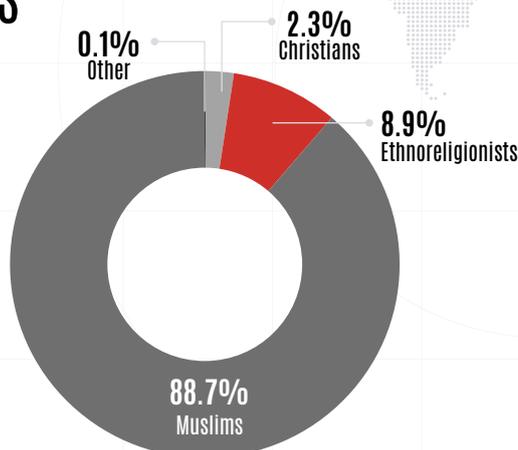




# MALI

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Constitution of Mali declares Mali to be a secular state that guarantees all citizens the same rights, regardless of their religious affiliation.<sup>1</sup> The secular nature of the state is enshrined in the Preamble. Article 2 stipulates that “All Malians are born and live free and equal in their rights and duties. Any discrimination based on social origin, colour, language, race, sex, religion, or political opinion is prohibited.” Mali’s constitution guarantees the right to freedom of worship and the right to profess one’s faith through individual or communal acts of worship. As Article 4 states: “Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, worship, opinion, expression, and creation in respect to the law.”<sup>2</sup>

Mali’s penal code also follows a fundamentally liberal approach. Nevertheless, discrimination based on religion, or acts that impede freedom of religious observance or worship, can be punished with up to five years in prison or a 10-year ban from the country.<sup>3</sup>

Concerning education, Article 18 of the constitution

says that “public education is mandatory, free and non-religious.”<sup>4</sup> Public schools cannot offer religious instruction, but private schools may do so. Privately funded Islamic religious schools (Madrasas) teach Islam but are required to follow the standard government curriculum. Non-Muslim students are not required to attend Islamic religious classes. The same rule applies in Catholic schools.<sup>5</sup>

All religious organisations are required to register with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation. This does not apply to those groups practising indigenous religious beliefs. Registration confers no tax preferences or other legal benefits, and there is no penalty for failure to register.<sup>6</sup>

Mali is predominantly Muslim Sunni. Almost 13% of the population belongs to other religions. Christians constitute just over 2%, two thirds being Catholic and one third Protestant. Mali is also home to traditional African religions (almost 9% of the population); some Muslims and Christians also incorporate African traditions into their ritual observances.<sup>7</sup>

Statutory national holidays include the Christian festivities of Christmas and All Saints’ Day, and the Muslim feasts of Mawlid (Birth of the Prophet) and Eid al-Fitr

(end of Ramadan).<sup>8</sup>

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

The security situation in Mali remained very unstable during the reporting period. The southern part of the country was relatively safe, while the situation in the central region and the north remained tense. There is a strong presence of foreign military troops, including UN forces.

Since early 2013 MINUSMA, the UN peacekeeping and stabilisation mission, has conducted military operations. France, which maintains a strong anti-terror unit in Mali, has also contributed 4,500 soldiers to an important military operation in the Sahel region called Operation Barkhane, an anti-insurgent action that involves cooperation between French forces and the armies of Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad.<sup>9</sup>

The rising ethnic and inter-communal violence that Mali has experienced in the past few years takes place largely in the region of Mopti, central Mali. The conflicts are mainly related to the ownership of land and resources though a certain religious element has also been recognised. The dispute mainly pits Muslim Fulani against the mostly ethno-religionist Dogon people, a group that also includes some Christians. For this reason, the Fulani have sometimes been accused of “operating alongside groups of Muslim extremists in central Mali.”<sup>10</sup>

Even though a long-standing simmering conflict, violent clashes have escalated recently becoming more numerous and deadly with a more clearly defined religious component. In a video released in November 2018, three leaders of the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (a coalition of jihadist groups created in 2017 and affiliated with al-Qaeda) called on the Fulani people dispersed across the Sahel and West Africa to “pursue jihad”.<sup>11</sup> However, the nature and depth of the links between the Fulani people and jihadi armed groups operating in Africa are unclear.

The situation in Mali attracted global media attention due to a massacre in a Fulani village. On 23 March 2019, the village was attacked by “armed men wearing traditional Dogon hunters’ clothing.”<sup>12</sup> The incident resulted in more than 130 Fulani assassinated, including children. According to the NGO International Christian

Concern, the attack was perpetrated by an anti-jihadist militia called Dan Na Ambassagou, composed of ethnic Dogon people. The attack was allegedly perpetrated as a reprisal against Fulani “harbouring Islamic extremists”.<sup>13</sup> Dogon militias have increasingly targeted Muslims, blaming them of having ties with jihadist organisations.

The massacre shocked Malian public opinion forcing the Malian government to resign (April 2019) for failing to disarm the militias.<sup>14</sup> A new government was appointed soon afterwards.

More attacks took place in 2019. On 9 June, 35 ethnic Dogon were assassinated by armed men in a predominantly Christian village. The attackers were reportedly Fulani “jihadists”.<sup>15</sup> On 2 July, one month later, 23 people were assassinated in a Fulani village in central Mali. The local mayor blamed the attack on Dogon hunters. Two other Fulani communities were targeted that same day.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to inter-ethnic violence, the government of Mali is confronting a significant and growing presence of armed jihadi groups, which are increasingly active in the northern and central parts of the country. Their main targets are the security forces, but they have also targeted religious personnel.

In February 2017, the armed group Nusrat al-Islam kidnapped a Colombian nun, Sister Gloria Argoti. At first, she was presumed dead, but in January 2019, the terrorist organisation released a video showing that she was alive.<sup>17</sup>

The nun’s abduction together with several attacks on military posts show the increasingly brazen nature of the international Islamist terror groups in Mali. One of the deadliest attacks occurred on 2 November 2019, when 53 Malian soldiers were killed in an attack claimed by the Islamic State.<sup>18</sup> The UN peacekeeping forces in Mali have also come under fire, with several casualties.<sup>19</sup> The government appears overwhelmed by the rapid spread of militias throughout the central and northern parts of the country.

Mali continued to be affected by a high level of political instability in mid-2020. In August 2020, the Malian President, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, announced his resignation hours after he and his Prime Minister, Bou-bou Cissé, were arrested by mutinying soldiers. This followed months of mass protests calling for Keita to

resign three years before the end of his second term as president.<sup>20</sup> At least 11 people were killed and more than 100 injured in clashes between Malian security forces and demonstrators.

During the protests, religious leaders appealed for peace. Cardinal Jean Zerbo, Archbishop of Bamako, Islamic High Council President Cherif Ousmane Madani Haidara, and Rev Nouh Ag InfaYattara, president of the Association of Evangelical Protestant Church Groups and Mission in Mali (AGEMPEM), called for peace and political dialogue.<sup>21</sup>

As a consequence of the measures taken to counter the coronavirus pandemic, Mali's Catholic Church suspended Mass services. Mosques, however, remained open.<sup>22</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The prospects for religious freedom are troubling. Mali's security situation and political stability have deteriorated in recent years. Although ethnic tensions are not new, the cycle of reprisals and sheer brutality on military and civilians alike, fuelled by the presence of jihadist groups, has reached unprecedented levels. This situation profoundly impacts freedom of religious as, even though religion appears not to be the main driver of violence, religious affiliation increases the susceptibility to persecution. Even with the efforts of Operation Barkhane, a transitional government led by an interim president will continue to struggle to contain the explosive combination of poverty, ethnic conflicts, and radical Islam.

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