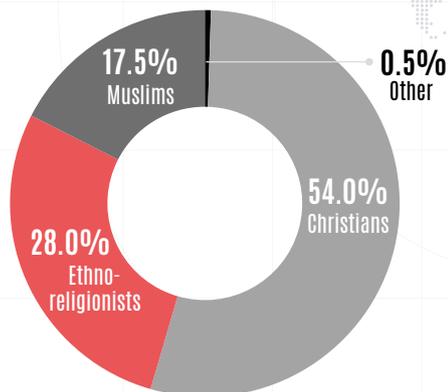




MOZAMBIQUE

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Mozambique is a secular state (Article 12, Section 2). Its constitution and laws enshrine freedom of religion.¹ The constitution prohibits discrimination on religious grounds and guarantees freedom of religious expression. Under Article 54, “All citizens shall have the freedom to practice or not to practice a religion” (Section 1); [r]eligious denominations shall have the right to pursue their religious aims freely and to own and acquire assets for realising their objectives” (Section 3).²

By and large, every Mozambican government has respected these principles since the country’s civil war (1977-1992) ended. Under the former Marxist-Leninist regime, religious freedom was tolerated. At present NGOs, including religious NGOs, must register with the Ministry of Justice.³ Religious organisations are permitted to own and run schools, but religious instruction in state-run schools is prohibited.⁴

Relations between the Republic of Mozambique and the Vatican are governed by a 2012 agreement.⁵ This recognises the Church’s legal independence with the

right to organise its internal affairs and appoint staff and other workers.⁶

Southern Mozambique and its main cities are predominantly Christian. The north and coastline areas are majority Muslim (mostly Sunni). Traditional African religious communities are vibrant and strongly represented particularly in rural regions.

Religious life in Mozambique is diverse and dynamic, attracting a number of evangelical Churches. Of note, as a consequence of the shared language, is the missionary activity of religious movements coming from Brazil such as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.⁷

Relations between Christianity and Islam in Mozambique have historically been calm, marked by respectful co-existence and deference to each other’s traditions. Recently, however, relations have been challenged by a growing Islamist insurgency in the north of the country.⁸ Violence, a consequence of poverty, corruption and frustration among disenfranchised young men, is fuelled by fundamentalist Islamic insurgents entering through neighbouring countries and young Islamic preachers returning to Mozambique from studies in countries such as Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and

South Africa imbued with a strict interpretation of Islam.⁹

The Churches, especially the Catholic Church, played a crucial role in ending the civil war between FRELIMO and RENAMO. Thanks to its involvement, the Church has gained credibility and influence in Mozambique.¹⁰

Despite decades of peace, the country's political situation is by no means trouble-free. The ruling party, FRELIMO, has been in power uninterrupted since independence in 1975 switching from Marxism to social-democracy. But the latest election in October of 2019 was contested.

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Whilst religious freedom is generally respected by the government and traditional inter-religious relations respectful, repeated attacks by different criminal armed groups and jihadist militias marked by merciless brutality is challenging the status quo, especially in the northern province of Cabo Delgado. The most prominent of these Islamist groups is Al-Sunna wa Jama'a (ASWJ) locally known as Al-Shabaab (not to be confused with the armed Somali jihadist group by the same name). It is estimated that since October 2017, Islamist insurgents have conducted some 139 attacks, killing more than 350 civilians and military.¹¹

On 5th June 2018, ASWJ/Al-Shabaab burnt 164 houses and five cars, killed cattle and beheaded a local Islamic leader inside a mosque before burning it down.¹² Over the following days, the group raided a neighbouring village, killing six people and burning more than 100 houses. In another village, attackers beheaded an elderly man and burnt down at least 100 homes. Over a two-month period (May-July), more than 400 homes were set on fire and thousands were left homeless in Cabo Delgado Province.

On 18th August 2018, armed insurgents affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) group attacked a Christian village in northern Mozambique, torched houses, forcing its residents to flee. This was one of several similar attacks in the region.¹³

On 25th November 2018, twelve people were killed in an Islamist attack in which ASWJ-Al-Shabaab militants attacked people with machetes and torched homes in Chicuaia Velha, a village in the northern Nangade dis-

trict. This provoked an exodus of locals who fled into neighbouring Tanzania.¹⁴

In February 2019, armed insurgents attacked Piqueue, a village close to the Quirimbas National Park.¹⁵

On 8th February 2019, suspected jihadists killed seven men and abducted four women in Cabo Delgado.¹⁶

In May 2019, after a devastating typhoon, Islamist insurgents attacked the affected villages killing nearly two dozen villagers and burning homes.¹⁷ On 28th May 2019, 16 people were killed when insurgents, using explosives and firearms, attacked a truck in Macomia.¹⁸

On 2nd May 2019, local media reported that 41-year-old parish priest, Father Filipe Rosa Marques, opened his parish church Maria Auxiliadora to more than a thousand storm victims of every background. "We don't ask about people's religions, human life is all we value," Father Marques told the AP news agency.¹⁹

On the 3rd July 2019, jihadist insurgents killed seven people including a policeman in northern Mozambique. The attack was claimed by the Islamic State group.²⁰

From 4-6th September 2019, during a pastoral visit to Mozambique, Pope Francis met with President Nyusi and government officials as well as an interfaith delegation of religious leaders, and presided over a Mass before 60,000 people in Maputo's national stadium. During the liturgy, the Pontiff urged Mozambicans to continue on the path of post-civil war reconciliation, and warned about the dangers of corruption and inequality.²¹

In November 2019, seven Islamist attacks took place, one claimed by the Islamic State, with a total of 33 dead including policemen and soldiers.²²

On 23rd March 2020, Islamist insurgents attacked and seized for a day the town of Mocimboa de Praia.²³ The main port of Cabo Delgado province is strategically located only 100 km south of Afungi, the site of Mozambique's huge offshore gas reserves.

On 7th April, 2020, although precise figures are unclear, it is estimated that over 50 men were killed in village of Xitaxi in Muidumbe district after having refused to join the ranks of the Islamist militants.²⁴

On 10th April 2020, a jihadist group attacked Muambula, a village in Cabo Delgado, destroying the homes of missionaries and damaging the church. The missionar-

ies were able to flee to Pemba.²⁵

On 12th May 2020, a Benedictine mission house was attacked in the village of Auasse, also in Cabo Delgado; the monks had to flee.²⁶ Despite these latest attacks the Catholic Bishop of Pemba, D. Luiz Fernando Lisboa, stated that he does not believe the attacks specifically targeted the Catholic Church.²⁷

In July 2020, the Bishop of Pemba, Luiz Fernando Lisboa, called for prayers for the victims of insurgent violence;²⁸ he also played a leading role in the solidarity campaign launched by the local Caritas for the suffering population of Cabo Delgado.²⁹

Violent actions continued to occur in August and September 2020, forcing the population to flee. Bishop Lisboa of Pemba received credible death threats after his repeated public appeals for help to the government and the international community. Pope Francis called the bishop to express his solidarity and support³⁰ and soon thereafter the president of Mozambique visited him in Pemba.³¹ To the date of this writing, violence is still growing and the jihadists have retaken territory including control of the port of Mocimboa da Praia, as well as several villages in Muidumbe where they have razed to the ground homes, schools and religious buildings, kidnapping the younger inhabitants.³² A particularly gruesome massacre perpetrated by Islamist terrorists linked with ISIS took place on 11th November in which approximately 50 people were decapitated with machetes.³³ This brings the total killed to over 2000 with more than 430,000 homeless in the majority Muslim region,³⁴ entirely dependent on the humanitarian aid provided by the Churches and international aid organizations.³⁵

The government is responding claiming to have killed more than 120 presumed jihadists in April 2020 alone.³⁶ The government response, while welcomed, has been also characterised by media and NGO's as heavy handed. Members of the Islamic Council (CISLAMO) said that government forces "arbitrarily detained Muslim leaders, in some cases for months", and that "those dressed in traditional Islamic clothing" or wearing beards "risked detention on suspicion of involvement" with the terrorists.³⁷

Mozambique's foremost Muslim leaders have also condemned the attacks stating "that the strict version of Islam preached by those allegedly responsible was not

in line with the country's traditional Islamic culture and practice".³⁸

In November 2020, the Bishops of Mozambique issued a Pastoral Letter titled "Hope, Peace and Reconciliation". Addressed to all the faithful and people of goodwill, the Mozambican Bishops called for peace and reconciliation in the country.³⁹

In addition to this, in the period under review, the country is experiencing an exponential growth of religious cults and sects, fuelled by audio and video clips posted on social media about alleged miracles. In light of this situation, Mozambican authorities are monitoring unregistered new Churches and are planning to draft a new law on religious freedom that would include a code of conduct.⁴⁰ In July 2020 the government began consultations.⁴¹ The new legislation, which will include religious training, will replace the existing law introduced almost 50 years ago.

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

While religious freedom is respected, and relations between the government and religious groups - as well as between the various religious groups - are strong and stable, there is a significant risk that the ongoing violence in the north may destabilise the historical religious tolerance in Mozambican society.

As with other countries in the region, this is largely related to the growth and convergence of criminal organisations, Islamic radicalisation and jihadist terrorism targeting principally the impoverished Cabo Delgado province where jihadist groups have found fertile ground for their operations. Affiliates of the Islamic State are inflicting serious losses on government forces (military and police) and civilian populations alike creating a new generation of IDP's. Of note is that as the northern and coastal regions of Mozambique are predominantly Muslim, many of the civilians killed or injured are Muslim.

Religious leaders are condemning the use of religion to promote violence and working together to call for peace and religious tolerance.⁴²

The prospects for religious freedom are dire. Much rests on the government's ability to control the criminal and Islamist terrorist activities plaguing the north of country; the government's willingness to address the

source of the social and economic issues in the impoverished region and; the capacity of religious leadership to isolate radicalisation, condemn the use of religion to promote violence and work together for reconciliation. Efforts from these authorities and stakeholders will help enable Mozambique to continue its legacy of religious tolerance.

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