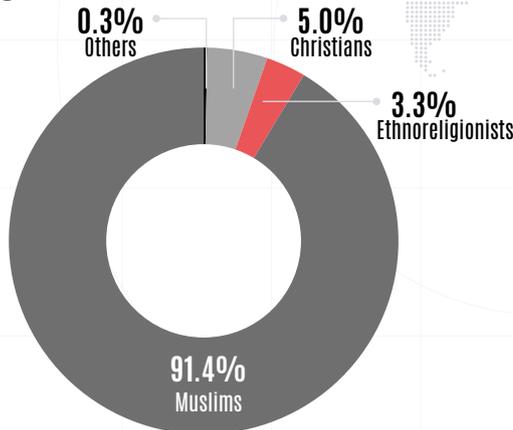




SENEGAL

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Article 1 of the Constitution of Senegal affirms the secularity of the State, establishes a clear separation between the state and religious organisations, and upholds the principle of equality “without distinction of origin, race, sex [and] religion”.¹ Article 5 criminalises all acts of racial, ethnic or religious discrimination. The constitution also forbids political parties to identify themselves to one specific religion (Article 4), and guarantees religious communities the right to practise their religions, as well as the right to manage and freely organise themselves (Article 24).

Islam is the predominant religion in the country.² Most Senegalese Muslims are Sunni and belong to Sufi brotherhoods concentrated in the northern part of the country, while most Christians live in the south-western part of Senegal, Catholics in particular,³ but there are also some Protestants. Many Muslims and Christians mix their customs with traditional African rites. Most adherents of traditional African religions can be found in the south-east of the country.⁴

Daily life in Senegal is traditionally characterised by a

spirit of tolerance. Conversion is possible and generally accepted. In matters of family law (marriages, divorces, paternity, inheritances, etc.), Muslims have the right to choose between Shari’a (Islamic law) and civil law.⁵ Customary and civil law cases are usually presided by civil court judges, but “religious leaders informally settle many disputes among Muslims, particularly in rural areas.”⁶

All religious groups must register with the authorities to obtain official recognition, which is a prerequisite if faith-based organisations wish to conduct business, open bank accounts, own property, receive private financial support, and enjoy certain tax benefits.⁷

Concerning religious education, public schools are allowed to provide optional religious education at the elementary level for four hours per week. Parents can choose between the Muslim and Christian curricula. The Ministry of National Education subsidises schools run by religious groups that meet national education standards. Most subsidies are granted to long-established Christian schools that have a high-quality teaching reputation.⁸

The Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry Foreign Affairs respectively require local and foreign religious

groups to submit annual activity reports that include disclosure of financial transactions. The intention behind this is to identify possible financing of terrorist groups. No cases of illegal activity in this regard came to light during the reporting period.⁹

The government provides financial assistance to religious organisations, usually for the upkeep or restoration of places of worship but also for special events, such as the pilgrimage to Makkah for Muslims or to the Vatican for Christians. All religious group can receive such assistance from the state.¹⁰

Statutory religious holidays include the Christian feasts of All Saints', Christmas and Ascension, and the Muslim festivities of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.¹¹

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

The general atmosphere in Senegal is one of tolerance and respect for religious freedom. The country is known for its good interfaith coexistence, and there have not been any significant changes in this regard over the past few years. Religious groups have generally continued to interact in a peaceful way.

In spite of the climate of tolerance that prevails in the country, a major controversy broke out when 22 students enrolled at the Sainte-Jeanne d'Arc Institute (a prestigious Christian institute in Dakar) were expelled for wearing the hijab (Islamic veil) at school. Earlier, in May 2019, the school had introduced a new rule banning the hijab on school grounds.¹² After the intervention of a Vatican representative, the students were readmitted on 19th September 2019 with the permission to wear a scarf,¹³ which had to be of "suitable size, provided by the school and which does not obstruct clothing."¹⁴

In March 2019, the pastor of the Cathedral of Ziguinchor, Fr. Damase Mary Coly, announced that the ceiling of the church had partially collapsed and the building had to be closed for safety reasons. The pastor criticised the bureaucratic delays that had prevented the needed repair work from being done so as to avoid the closure of the cathedral.¹⁵

In April 2020, the St. Germaine Parish in Kolda was broken into and sacred objects were stolen. The parish priest complained that the criminals took advantage of the coronavirus curfew.¹⁶

Many Muslim families in Senegal send their children to religious schools called daaras to learn the Quran. A June 2019 Human Rights Watch report noted that some Quranic teachers force many children to beg for money and food. Furthermore, some children said they were victims of physical abuse in some daaras. Children that escaped from the schools ended up in children's shelters, and some have become victims of human trafficking.¹⁷ Even though the government has pledged to address the issue, to date it has failed to do so.

In 2019 and 2020, renovation work got underway in certain religious sites in the Sufi holy cities of Touba and Tivaouane.¹⁸ The Dakar Cathedral was also renovated¹⁹ as was the Basilica of Our Lady of Deliverance in Popenguine, with the goal of improving conditions for Christian pilgrims²⁰. Moreover, in September 2019, a new mosque was inaugurated in Dakar. The mosque is believed to be the biggest in West Africa with a capacity for 30,000 people.²¹

In March 2020, places of worship closed in Senegal due to health measures designed to contain the coronavirus pandemic. In May 2020, the authorities allowed churches and mosques to reopen despite the growing number of cases; this followed public pressure from Muslims who were celebrating the holy month of Ramadan.²² Senegal's Catholic bishops decided to keep churches closed until mid-August as a safety precaution.²³

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Senegal has maintained a positive coexistence between religious groups, and the government respects the principle of religious freedom. This is not likely to change in the near future. One of the possible reasons is the strong influence of Sufi Islam in the country, a form of Islam that focuses on spiritual development. Senegal is home to some of the most important Sufi brotherhoods in the world, such as the Tijaniyya.

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen how the rise of fundamentalist Islam in neighbouring regions of Africa may affect this historically peaceful coexistence. Currently, some media and experts are worried about this trend and the complacency of governmental authorities towards it. For example, in an interview with La Croix International, a Senegalese scholar expressed con-

cerns about an agreement reached on 20th July 2019 between the government and the Senegalese Fund for Zakat, an association deemed to be Salafist.²⁴

Although the real impact of radical Islam in Senegal is as yet unclear, prospects for freedom of religion in the country remain positive since the authorities have traditionally favoured, and continue to encourage, peaceful relations between religious groups.

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