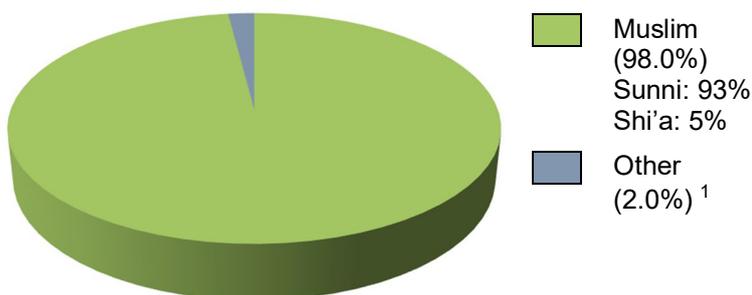


NIGER



Area: 1,267,000 km ²	Population²: 18,045,729	Political system: Democracy / Autocracy ³	Major Language(s): French, Hausa, Djerma ⁴
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Legal Framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

The state of Niger, in the Sahel region of West Africa, increasingly became a focus of world attention during 2015. The principal cause has been the clear increase in Islamist activity in the country, above all in the frontier region with its southern neighbour, Nigeria.

Article 8 of the 2010 constitution upholds respect for all beliefs and it guarantees equality before the law irrespective of religious identity. Article 9 states: "...political parties with an ethnic, regionalist or religious character are prohibited. No party may be knowingly created with the purpose of promoting an ethnic group, a region or a religion." Religious groups are required to register, but there is no indication that this has caused any difficulties and there are no reports of applications being refused.⁵

However, there is another side to this seemingly liberal order enshrined in the 2010 constitution. A number of Islamist organisations have taken root in the country, for example Wahhabist groups to whom the pluralist spirit of the constitution is entirely alien. They fear an alleged "softening" of the religious identity of Niger by a secular, democratic state.⁶

In fact, Niger is an overwhelmingly Muslim state. Among the Muslims themselves, 95 percent are Sunni and around five percent Shi'a. There are small Christian communities, both Catholic and Protestant. Religious instruction is formally prohibited in state schools. There is a ministry of religious affairs, which is responsible for inter-religious dialogue in Niger. The constitution also states that the president, the prime minister and the parliamentary president may take the oath of office on the holy book of their own religion.

The small Catholic community in Niger is centred on an archdiocese in the capital, Niamey, and a diocese in the city of Maradi and is widely admired for its commitment in the social and charitable field. The Catholic Church runs a number of kindergartens, hospitals and medical stations, including a leprosy hospital, as well as schools and an orphanage.

But Christians have had to reconcile themselves with a reality where, in spite of frequent professions of democracy, the state system retains strongly authoritarian tendencies. For example, Archbishop Laurent Lompo of Niamey was rudely interrupted during a television address on state TV on 27th April 2014, after having appealed to the parties campaigning for power to show restraint.⁷ The government saw this as an attack on its own policies.

Fundamentally, however, relations between Muslims and other faith communities have traditionally been good. Muslims and Christians regularly visit one another on their major religious festivals. The Muslim-Christian inter-faith forum is active in every part of the country and works for cooperation between the various religions and faith communities.⁸

To cite a recent example, in 2015 Christmas Day and the Muslim feast of Mouloud fell close together, just a few hours apart. In their joint message to Muslims for the feast of Mouloud (also known as Maouloud or Mawlid), Archbishop Lompo and Bishop Ambroise Ouedraogo of Maradi stated: "This is a sign that reminds us that we, as Christians and Muslims, must engage in dialogue so that peace can come into the world, in the name of our common faith in Abraham." The two bishops emphasised that this was the first time in 457 years that this Muslim feast had fallen on 24th December. They stated: "This is a sign from the Almighty, who urges us as believers of different religions to unity." They added: "The current situation in our country demands that we as Christians and Muslims concretely put into practice the love, forgiveness and respect of the other in our inter-personal relations, and in this way guarantee peace and contribute to national unity." And in neighbouring Senegal, Archbishop Benjamin Ndiaye of Dakar in his Christmas message likewise expressed the wish that "the proximity of the Muslim feast of Maouloud and the Christian feast of Christmas might lead to a greater sense of community among believers, both in prayer and through expressions of fraternal love."⁹

Incidents

Unfortunately, however, this peaceful co-existence between the religions in Niger has been increasingly disturbed in recent years by Islamist violence and attacks. On 16th and 17th January 2015 there were countrywide upheavals with violence directed above all at Christians. The violence had begun as a reaction to the statements of solidarity for the victims of the terrorist attack on the editorial offices of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, in Paris.¹⁰ 10 people were killed, and within a few hours 72 churches were attacked and burned, together with numerous schools and other Christian properties, such as the houses of pastors and priests and Christian shops and businesses. In the space of just four hours roughly 80 percent of the Christian churches in the country were destroyed. Most severely affected were the capital Niamey and the town of Zinder.

Around 70 suspects were arrested following the attacks. However, one year on, January 2016, there had not been a single trial of any of those who had been arrested. In fact there is still considerable argument in Niger as to whether the violence was the work of Islamist extremists or the political opposition.¹¹ Yet, after the violence, eyewitnesses had reported that the mainly young rioters had actually been following lists in order to choose their targets. This was no spontaneous protest, they claimed, but rather a deliberately targeted campaign by Islamists against the Christian minority.

To this day, many of the churches have been only temporarily repaired, and many communities have to worship in the open air as a result. According to estimates, the rebuilding could cost three

million Euros – money the impoverished local communities cannot find from their own resources. The Catholic bishops were reluctant to accept state help. On 2nd July 2015 the government announced that it would commit aid to help rebuild the damaged churches but initial estimates suggested that the amount offered would not account for all the repairs needed.¹²

It is notable that in some cases Muslims are also helping the community members to rebuild – a sign that the desire for peaceful coexistence has not been extinguished, despite all the violence. In fact there has even been a reaction in the opposite direction, in that the violence has brought the Christians closer together in their faith, while many Muslims are insisting in public that there are no problems between the faith communities in Niger. As a result, committees have been established in many different places to promote dialogue between the two religions.

Nonetheless, following the terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso in January 2016 and in Mali in November 2015, there is growing fear once again among Christians of Islamist violence.

In Niger it is possible to distinguish between three different groups of Christians: the members of traditional churches such as the Catholic Church; Christians from a Muslim background; and the members of Protestant free churches and groups.¹³

The group that faces the greatest social pressure is the converts. These are the former Muslims who have been baptised as Christians. Almost always their conversion to a religion other than Islam comes up against fierce rejection.¹⁴ Often such converts are exposed to social exclusion and even among their own families they often have to fight hard for respect and acceptance. Other Christians, who have always lived as such, enjoy much greater freedom that also allows them to express their religious faith openly.

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

For the foreseeable future, Islamic fundamentalism, penetrating the country from neighbouring countries, represents the greatest threat to security, to interreligious relations and indeed to religious freedom generally in Niger. There are many indications of an increase in Islamist activity. For example, in recent years Al Qaeda has repeatedly attempted to abduct Western civilians in the country, while from neighbouring Nigeria the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram has been constantly extending the range of its activities into neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Their ultimate aim is to establish an Islamic state with the strictest interpretation of the Islamic *Shari'a* law.

A major social problem in Niger is the housing, feeding and integration of thousands of refugees from the civil war in neighbouring Mali. Added to these are more than 15,000 refugees who (as of December 2015) had fled the terrorist attacks of Boko Haram in neighbouring Nigeria. Most of these refugees are living either close to the frontier or along the shores of Lake Chad, often living together in the villages of the local people.¹⁵

Boko Haram is also operating within Niger. At the end of January 2016, the UNHCR reported that around 100,000 people had been forced to flee attacks in their home region of Diffa in south-east Niger.¹⁶ The UNHCR team in Niger described the situation as very serious. Local villagers were among those who had fled and were now internal refugees within the country. Other people had already been forced to flee several times. Among them were Nigerian refugees who had hitherto been staying with host families or in various other places in the region. Around 170 villages in the

Diffa were now abandoned. According to the UNHCR, Niger's army was unable to guarantee the protection of these villages and hamlets, since they are scattered across a wide area, and in any case the attacks generally take place by night.

Another incident that has raised fears of Islamist terrorism in Niger was the terrorist attack by Al Qaeda in the Maghreb in neighbouring Burkina Faso in January 2016, where altogether 30 people died in the attack on a restaurant and hotel in the capital Ouagadougou on 15th January. Another 50 people were injured, in some cases seriously. Since then fears have grown in Niger that this country too could become a target of Islamist terror.¹⁷ Ado Mahaman, a political scientist in Niger's capital Niamey, told the German TV station Deutsche Welle that "No country can defend itself against this devastating plague." He went on to explain that this kind of terrorism takes on different forms and is therefore difficult to combat – precisely because the extremists are able to mingle undetected among the people.

The fact that Niger has so far been largely regarded as more secure than some other West African states is mainly due to its long history of military cooperation with France and the United States. President Mahamadou Issoufou, who was re-elected in the elections of 26th March, has come to an understanding with the West. France has important uranium mining interests in Niger, which is the world's fourth-largest producer of the nuclear fuel. For this reason, the United States and the EU have a strong interest in preventing Niger from falling into the hands of the terrorists.¹⁸ After taking the presidential oath on the *Qur'an* in the presence of nine African heads of state, on 2nd April 2016, President Issoufou promised to make his own contribution to the anti-terrorism campaign against Islamist groups such as Boko Haram and Al Qaeda.¹⁹

¹ U.S. State Department 2016: International Religious Freedom Report 2014

² CIA 2016: The World Factbook, estimate, July 2015

³ Niger fell victim to a series of coups and political instability following its independence from France in 1960. Today the country struggles in the face of drought, insurgency and wide-spread poverty.: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13943662>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_Index

⁴ Ibid

⁵ U.S. State Department 2016: International Religious Freedom Report 2014

⁶ Open Doors, country profile, Niger, January 2016

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ www.fides.org, report of 28.12.15

¹⁰ http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/01/18/niger_christen_zwischen_angst_und_aufbruch_/1201791

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² http://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/niger_160106.php

¹³ Open Doors, country profile, Niger, January 2016

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ <http://www.unhcr.de/presse/nachrichten/artikel/fd68528c26bb3619db4d75fc95b94daa/niger-tausende-menschen-durch-boko-haram-vertrieben.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.dw.com/de/trotzt-niger-dem-terror/a-18990104>

¹⁸ <http://www.dw.com/de/kommentar-gefahr-f%C3%BCr-den-niger/a-19104653>

¹⁹ <http://www.zeit.de/news/2016-04/02/niger-nigers-staatschef-issoufou-feierlich-fuer-zweite-amtszeit-vereidigt-02193803>