

## Religious Freedom in Africa

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Given the fact that Africa is a continent made up of 54 countries, one can expect to find a great variety of situations as far as religious freedom is concerned. These are the main ones we have identified during the period covered by the present report:-

- 1) There are countries where Islam is the official State religion: Algeria, Morocco, Djibouti, Comoros, Sudan, Tunisia and Mauritania. In some of them, like Sudan and Mauritania, conversion to a religion different from Islam is tantamount to apostasy, a crime which can be severely punished. In some other Islamic nations, while conversion may not attract such harsh measures, the authorities do seriously limit the possibility of changing one's faith, as it is the case in Morocco and Algeria. Libya is a peculiar case: although it has no legislation forbidding conversion outside Islam, doing so may land one into serious trouble, like arrest and imprisonment.
- 2) In some other African countries, although the Constitution acknowledges the right to religious freedom, in practice there are strong restrictions to the exercise of this fundamental liberty. This is the case of Eritrea, where the government compels all religious personnel to undergo lengthy military service and it strives to exercise tight control over the different religious groups by nominating, for instance the Great Mufti of the Muslim community and the Orthodox Patriarch. The Catholic Church in Eritrea, who has refused to go by this policy and has criticized the lack of freedom in the country, suffers serious restrictions, such as the refusal to grant visas to foreign missionary personnel. Another similar case is Rwanda, where several priests have been detained or/and fined because of their views on reconciliation which did not match the official version. Within this category we may include countries whose legislation requires religious groups to have a minimum number of followers in order to be able to register. This criterion denies, in practice, to some Evangelist and Pentecostal groups the right to exercise freedom of worship in a number of countries. It has also provoked extreme situations such as the official prohibition of Islam in Angola, which was issued by the authorities at the end of 2013.
- 3) The above mentioned cases should not overshadow the reality that in most African countries, their citizens enjoy the right to religious freedom, which is exercised against the background of a favourable culture of tolerance and mutual respect among different religious denominations. The Constitutions of most African countries acknowledge the secular character of the State, even in nations with a majority of Muslims, as in Senegal, Niger and Guinea -Conakry. Some of these countries even have a tradition of religious freedom that could stand as a model: Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Sierra Leone, for example. Some African countries protect this right with specific legislation which penalize discrimination and attacks against others on religious grounds, as it is the case in Ethiopia and Gabon. These laws rest on long-standing cultures of religious tolerance, which are manifested on phenomena such as mixed marriages and the presence in the same family of persons from different religions. Notwithstanding this, in recent years some of these African countries with a long history of pacific religious co-existence have seen a serious deterioration of this atmosphere of harmony. We could mention the case of Kenya, where Muslims often

complain of receiving a discriminatory treatment because of being associated to terrorists groups. Also in Tanzania, extremists are eroding the country's tradition of pacific religious co-existence among Christians and Muslims, particularly in the island of Zanzibar.

Concerning the trends in the field of religious freedom which have developed during the last two years, these are the ones which come out strongly:

- 1) Islamic fundamentalism is steadily growing and is being spearheaded by violent radical groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (in West Africa), Boko Haram (in Nigeria and some of its neighbours) and Al Shabaab, who from its stronghold in Somalia has become a serious threat to some other countries from East Africa. Countries affected by the Jihadist threat are basically responding with military means, often with help from foreign powers. Nevertheless, this is insufficient and should be complemented with policies that favour development, religious dialogue and trust in the government in areas where the Islamists draw their supporters.
- 2) Cases of religious intolerance have increased in a number of African countries, particularly in Egypt, Libya and Sudan. The case of Mariam Ibrahim, a Christian Sudanese woman who was sentenced to death because of apostasy and later on set free, attracted a lot of international interest, but some other similar cases have been less known. For example, Nadia Abdel, an Egyptian woman who in January 2014 was sentenced to 15 years of prison for having returned to her original Christian faith after her husband's death. In Libya and Egypt, Christian communities, particularly the Coptic churches, have suffered numerous attacks. The Central African Republic deserves a special mention. Following the violent campaign of attacks against Christians launched by the Seleka Muslims rebels in 2012 and 2013, militias known as "anti-balaka" responded with waves of revenge against the Muslim minority, which included the systematic destruction of Mosques and a harsh campaign of religious cleansing. The Central African conflict has taken on a dangerous character of political hatred and intolerance.
- 3) When interpreting statistics, it must be born in mind that many African have no trouble following simultaneously beliefs from more than one religious group. Also, in some countries a segment of the population, often undetected, is beginning to identify with atheism or agnosticism.
- 4) The existence of inter-religious platforms for dialogue and social action in favour of peace and human rights is a hopeful trend which continues to make steady progress. Inter-denominational groups, at various levels, exist in countries such as Cameroon, Nigeria, the Central African Republic, Uganda, Zambia, South Africa and Kenya, among others.

#### Note

This analysis forms part of Aid to the Church in Need's *Religious Freedom in the World Report – 2014*. To view the report in full please visit: [www.religion-freedom-report.org](http://www.religion-freedom-report.org)