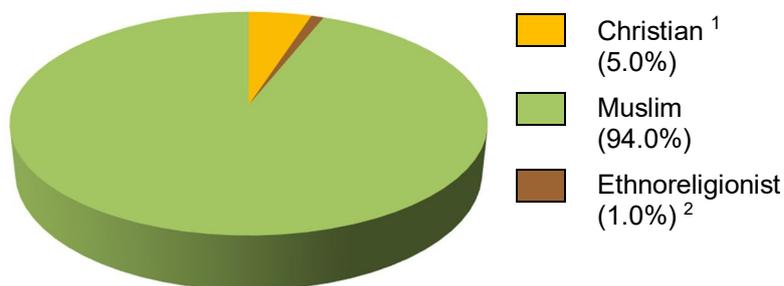


SENEGAL



Area:
196,722 km²

Population³:
14.0 million

Political system:
Democracy

Major Language(s):
French, Wolof, Pulaar,
Jola, Mandinka

Legal Framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

The Republic of Senegal has traditionally been characterised by good relations between the various religions, and by a climate of general religious freedom. Research shows the situation has not essentially changed during the period of this report. On the contrary, Senegal can be seen more as a rock of stability in an otherwise unstable area of northern and western Africa. While neighbouring Gambia, which is virtually completely enclosed by Senegal, declared itself an Islamic Republic in 2015, Senegal, also a majority Muslim country, has sent out an altogether different signal. Thus, for example, the wearing of the Burka – the fully enclosing Muslim veil for women – has been banned.⁴ According to Senegalese President Macky Sall, this full veil corresponds “neither to our tradition nor to our understanding of Islam”. He adds: “We cannot accept people imposing alien clothing regulations upon us.”

In fact 95 percent of Muslims in Senegal adhere to moderate forms of Islam.⁵ There are other countries in West Africa, where Muslims make up more or less a substantial proportion of the population, where the Burka is likewise banned, including Chad, Cameroon and Gabon.

The essentially peaceful coexistence between the people and religions in Senegal is reflected in their constitution. Article 1 declares the country to be a secular state.⁶ Similarly, article 24 guarantees liberty to religious groups, together with the unrestricted freedom to administer and organise themselves appropriately.⁷

The prevailing religion in Senegal is Islam.⁸ Most Muslims belong to Sufi brotherhoods, which are concentrated in the north of the country, while most of the Christians, mainly Catholics, live in the south-west. There are also Protestants and others who combine Christian customs with traditional African rites. Most of the followers of traditional African beliefs are found in the south-east of the country.⁹

The clear dominance of the Muslim faith does not appear to affect the peaceful coexistence between the various faiths. Everyday life in Senegal is characterised by this spirit of mutual respect. In matters of personal and family law, Muslims have the right to choose between the *Shari'a* law and the civil law. All groups, whether religious or non-religious, are required to register in order to obtain the official status of an organisation. Successful registration enables the organisation to engage in business activity, open bank accounts, own property, obtain financial subsidies from private sources and enjoy certain fiscal reliefs.¹⁰

In the matter of education, the state likewise strives to be even-handed. Thus, in-state-run primary schools, there are up to four hours of religious instruction weekly. The parents can choose either Muslim or Christian education.¹¹

During the period of this report, the state provided free air tickets to Saudi Arabia for Muslims making the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. The tickets were distributed via the local imams. The government also subsidised Catholic pilgrimages to Rome, Palestine and Israel.¹² Major religious festivals, such as the Christian feast of Christmas, are regularly celebrated by both Christians and Muslims.¹³ In an interview with Voice of America, Bakary Sambe, a lecturer at the Gaston Berger University in St Louis, in northern Senegal, and also head of the Observatory on Religions, Radicalism and Conflict in Africa, stated: "The celebrations symbolise the uniqueness of Senegal, where we are a Muslim majority and where we have a special cohabitation between Muslims and Christians." He explained that in Senegal most Muslims belong to one of the Sufi brotherhoods which, he said, "interpret Islam according to our social values in a peaceful way, based on education and tolerance. ... We have a critical assimilation of Islamic faith. We accept it as a faith, but we try always to harmonise between Islamic and local values." He added that this approach acted as a barrier against the kind of Islamic extremism that is seen in the neighbouring states of western and central Africa.¹⁴

Good relations between the two religions were demonstrated by an event some years previously. When Serigne Mouhammadou Mansour Sy, the general Caliph of Tidjanniyya, died in 2012, the following tribute was paid to him by Cardinal Theodore Adrien Sarr, the Archbishop of Dakar: "He was a man open to dialogue, a man of God, whose wisdom should clearly [show] how greatly God dwelled within him. Future generations will find in him the enrichment of an ardent commitment to social peace and a guiding figure who always steered us away from the paths of the radical religious fundamentalism that is shaking our world today."¹⁵

And yet, even in Senegal, concern is growing about attacks by Islamist terrorists. To cite just one example, at the New Year celebrations for 2015/2016, the authorities told people not to let off fireworks, in order to avoid stirring up fears and provoking confusion.¹⁶ After the devastating terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015, President Macky Sall warned against caricaturing Islam, and saying that religion had been responsible for the attacks in France. He said: "This would be a catastrophe for all humanity." He said if the attacks were "placed on the shoulders of one religion", it would show the terrorists had won. He condemned the "unspeakable crime" committed in Paris, and called for all nations to unite to combat terrorism.¹⁷

Earlier, in January 2015, following the attack on the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, the Catholic bishops of Senegal reacted similarly. In a joint declaration, they wrote: "We strongly condemn the murderous violence of terrorism and fanaticism that attacks human life in the name of God. This is unacceptable because life is a gift from God that must be respected and protected."¹⁸

At the same time, however, they also condemned the Mohammed cartoons in Charlie Hebdo and recalled that freedom of opinion does not give one the right to offend the religious sensibilities of millions of people. The bishops stated: “We strongly condemn the fact that a boundary was crossed in the name of freedom of opinion and that a lack of respect was shown towards our fellow men, offending them in their dignity, their choices, their faith and religious convictions.” The bishops added: “Religion is a very sensitive fiber. Therefore we must not play with fire! For this reason, without ever entering into the logic of revenge and violence, we denounce the abusive nature of these publications.” But, referring to the cartoons, the bishops also stated: “These caricatures cannot and must not, in any way, be treated as actions carried out by Christians against Islam”, as might be inferred from the violent reactions against Christians in Niger, where on 16th and 17th January 2015 a number of churches and Christian properties were attacked and vandalised by Muslims protesting against the publications in Charlie Hebdo. As the bishops pointed out, the same cartoons were “often directed against the Christian religion and especially against Catholics”. They added: “We launch this appeal to protect our dear Senegal from the demons of division, hatred and violence, as religious Christian and Muslim leaders have always done.”¹⁹

Incidents

Research showed that there were no serious offences against religious freedom in Senegal during the period of this report. A central challenge for all the major religious faiths is the battle against poverty. This also has a direct impact on the life of faith, since many young people leave their local communities in the hope of finding a new and seemingly better life abroad – a phenomenon that is occurring to an increasing extent throughout West Africa. In many places, only the elderly and children are left behind. Families are broken apart. The Catholic Church is trying to tackle this problem. To give one example, on 8th December 2015 Archbishop Benjamin Ndiaye of Dakar launched a project aimed at tackling poverty in the region of Pikine.²⁰ This project was due to run for two years initially with funding from the German diocese of Rottenburg and Stuttgart, coordinated by Caritas Senegal.

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

On 28th August 2015, the 28th National Council of the Jeunesse Etudiante Catholique opened in Kolda in Senegal, with the theme “May the young Catholic student movement be a builder of positive change through solidarity, fraternity and tolerance”. The participants addressed issues such as the family, inclusive management at schools and universities, and religious fundamentalism. The meeting, which continued until 5th September, also involved panel discussions, starting with “Challenges of the family in the 21st Century”. This involved a Catholic priest, an imam, a sociologist and a jurist. Another discussion, entitled “Is the inclusive management at school and university a guarantee of stability?”, involved an education expert, a university inspector and a moderator. The topic of “religious fundamentalism: What is the attitude of pupils and students?” was also discussed by a Catholic priest, an imam, and a specialist in religions.²¹ The conference was an example of the way in which both sides – Christians and Muslims – are now making greater efforts to encourage peaceful coexistence and jointly tackle pressing social issues.

This was also the goal of a forum of Catholic and Muslim young people held on 10th and 11th March 2016 in a parish in the diocese of Thiès, to the north of Dakar. In particular, they discussed the importance of inter-religious dialogue in the face of growing extremism and violence associated with it. It is clear that in Senegal, there is growing concern about the threat of Islamist violence.²²

Another issue that involves young people in Senegal is the problem of refugees in West Africa. The problem affects Senegal in three different ways at once. Firstly, Senegal has its own internal unrest, with a conflict that has been going on for many years between the government and separatist rebels in the province of Casamance. Thousands of people have fled this conflict and travelled to the neighbouring countries of Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. Secondly, Senegal is a transit land for young migrants seeking to escape Africa for Europe. And thirdly, it is a host country for refugees, in particular those from Mauritania.²³

In May 2015, in order to be able to respond more quickly and appropriately to the situation in Senegal, and also reach more people, the Catholic Church established a new web-based radio transmitter, which broadcasts prayers, homilies, personal testimonies, Church music and meditations on the Christian life. The new transmitter can be accessed via the Internet portal of the Catholic Church in Senegal (www.seneglise.sn). The media centre of the Archdiocese of Dakar has developed this transmitter in collaboration with young engineers. Radio Mercy, as the station is called, sees itself as an instrument of the new evangelisation, according to archdiocesan sources: "The issuer has as its mission the promotion of Gospel values, and the commitment of Christian communities. In the future, it will provide for the transmission of programs related also to social issues such as education, agriculture, economy and sustainable development."²⁴

All this shows that Christians and Muslims in Senegal often follow a common path in an effort to develop the country and strengthen the benefits arising from the role of faith in society.

¹ U.S. State Department, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014

² Traditional African religions.

³ CIA 2016: The World Factbook, Schätzung Juli 2015

⁴ http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/11/19/senegal_verbietet_die_burka/1188098

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

⁶ http://www.gouv.sn/IMG/pdf/constitution_sn.pdf (French), <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/sn/sn014en.pdf> (English)

⁷ Ebd.

⁸ U.S. State Department, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014

⁹ Ebd.

¹⁰ Ebd.

¹¹ Ebd.

¹² Ebd.

¹³ <http://www.voanews.com/content/muslim-senegal-celebrates-christmas/3116967.html>

¹⁴ Ebd.

¹⁵ Fidesdienst vom 10.12.12

¹⁶ Ebd.

¹⁷ Radio Vatikan, 17.11.2015

¹⁸ http://fides.org/de/news/35485-AFRIKA_SENEGAL_Bischoefe_verurteilen_Gewalt_im_Namen_Gottes_und_warnen_vor_Beleidigungen_des_religioesen_Empfindens#.VoVg6E9zAo0

¹⁹ Ebd.

²⁰ http://fides.org/de/news/37301-AFRIKA_SENEGAL_Caritas_Dakar_lanciert_Programm_zur_Bekämpfung_von_Armut_und_illegaler_Auswanderung#.VoVZRu9zAo0

²¹ http://fides.org/de/news/36675-AFRIKA_SENEGAL_Katholische_Studenten_engagieren_sich_fuer_positiven_Wandel#.VoVDsU9zAo0

²² http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/03/23/jugendforum_im_senegal_f%C3%BCr_interreligi%C3%B6sen_dialog/1216959

²³ UNHCR 2016: 2015 UNHCR subregional operations profile - West Africa

²⁴ http://fides.org/de/news/36145-AFRIKA_SENEGAL_Katholische_Kirche_bringt_Web_Radio_auf_den_Weg#.VoVds09zAo1