

Table of Contents

- [***Aid to the Church in Need Report on freedom of religion 2021***](#)
- [***Jihadists attack Christians in Niger***](#)

Aid to the Church in Need Report on freedom of religion 2021

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Aid to the Church in Need (2021) - <https://bit.ly/3ywjNMk> - The constitution of Niger's "Seventh Republic", promulgated on 25th November 2010,^[1] guarantees, among other things, the separation of powers, decentralisation, a multi-party system, and protection of civil and human rights.

According to the constitution, the Republic of Niger is a secular state. This provides for a clear separation of state and religion. Respect for all faiths is embodied in Article 8, which enshrines equality of all people before the law, regardless of religious identity.

Article 9 stipulates that "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 communities must register with the authorities.^[2]

The National Assembly of Niger approved a law in June 2019, which reaffirmed the existing legislature on freedom of religion but granted the government the power to regulate and oversee the construction, financing, and use of places of worship and other religious facilities.^[3]

The country's president, prime minister and the speaker of the National Assembly must take a religious oath when they assume office. The oath varies according to the office holder's religion. Conversion is permitted. Larger public events with the aim of proselytising are, however, prohibited for security reasons.^[4]

Muslims represent the vast majority of the country's population. There are, though, small Christian (Catholic and Protestant) communities. Religious instruction is not allowed in state-run schools. Schools with religious sponsors require the approval of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Education.^[5] The Office of Religious Affairs in Niger's Ministry of the Interior is responsible for interreligious dialogue (full name is "Ministry of the Interior, Public Security, Decentralisation, and Traditional and Religious Affairs").^[6]

Incidents and developments

Because of its location in the heart of the Sahel region, Niger has become an important focal point for Islamist jihadist armed groups, who pose a serious threat of religious radicalisation. In a continued effort to counter the rapid growth of Wahhabism in the country, the government has sought to standardise Islamic practices through an Islamic forum of more than 50 national Islamic organisations.^[7]

During the reporting period, the Muslim-Christian Interfaith Forum has continued to meet promoting interreligious dialogue and peace. However, some reports suggest a certain deterioration in relations between Christians and Muslims, largely because of increased social pressure from more conservative Islamic branches. One manifestation of interreligious tensions is the decreased acceptance of each other's religious holidays.[\[8\]](#)

The Sahel, where Niger is located, has become one of the hotspots of international and regional jihadist terrorism, and has seen a rapid rise in militant Islamist groups, such as Boko Haram, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which have gained a foothold in the country.[\[9\]](#)

In September 2018, Fr. Pierluigi Maccalli, a Catholic missionary, was kidnapped from a parish church in Bomoanga, a village near the border with Burkina Faso, by armed militants from Boko Haram.[\[10\]](#) The Catholic mission had to close due to security concerns and the nuns and missionaries fled to Niamey.[\[11\]](#) The National Committee of Inter and Intra Religious Dialogue, which includes Muslim leaders, condemned the kidnapping and called for his release.[\[12\]](#) He was eventually freed in October 2020 in Mali.[\[13\]](#)

In November 2018, Boko Haram kidnapped 15 girls in the Diffa region in south-western Niger. Parliamentarians urged the government to take action and deploy the military in the area to protect the local population.[\[14\]](#)

On 13th May 2019, an unidentified group attacked the Catholic parish of Dolbel in the Diocese of Niamey, wounding the priest.[\[15\]](#) Three days later, ISGS militants conducted an ambush in Tongo Tongo, a village also in south-western Niger, killing 28 Nigerien soldiers.[\[16\]](#)

In June 2019, Boko Haram threatened Christians in Diffa telling them to leave the region within three days or they would be killed.[\[17\]](#) The next day, a group of demonstrators set a Protestant church on fire in Maradi, the third largest city in Niger, as a protest against the arrest of a prominent local imam.[\[18\]](#)

In October of 2019, suspected Islamist militants killed 25 soldiers and wounded six more in an attack against an army post in western Niger near the border with Mali.[\[19\]](#)

In December 2019, al-Qaeda and ISGS militants attacked a military base in western Niger, killing 71 soldiers.[\[20\]](#) Later that month, on 26th December, fourteen soldiers escorting a voting registration team were killed in an ambush by Islamist militants in Tillaberi, also in western Niger.[\[21\]](#)

On 9th January 2020, suspected Islamist militants conducted the deadliest attack on a Nigerien army base in years with at least 89 fatalities.[\[22\]](#) In February 2020, an action by the French-led military forces, Operation Barkhane, killed 120 terrorists in western Niger.[\[23\]](#) Although less attacks were registered during the Covid-19 pandemic (March to November 2020), the violence continued.

In March 2020, the authorities decided to close all places of worship in order to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was met with protests throughout the country, because the holy month of Ramadan was about to begin.

On 19th April 2020, protesters threw stones at the pastor's house next to a Protestant church.[\[24\]](#)

On 13th May 2020 all places of worship were allowed to reopen.[\[25\]](#)

In the first week of January 2021, in the wake of the presidential elections, two attacks by suspected Islamists in the province of Tillabéri caused close to 100 deaths and hundreds more injured among the civilian population. Also, in the same week, at least five French soldiers were ambushed and killed in same region.[26]

Prospects for religious freedom

The security situation in Niger is very volatile. The country has suffered attacks from various Islamist fundamentalist groups, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group. Troops from the United States, Germany, France and Italy have been deployed to the country to combat the terrorist threat.

Niger's neighbours are also very unstable and plagued by violence. In the south of the country, troops are combatting expanding Boko Haram terrorist attacks from Nigeria. In neighbouring Mali, the government is fighting against terrorists linked to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

The extremist militant violence has caused great suffering for Niger's majority Muslim population, though instances of targeted attacks against Christians - as evidenced by the kidnapping and subsequent release of Fr. Maccalli - have been recorded.

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has compounded the situation. The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called for a global ceasefire in April 2020, which Pope Francis echoed and repeated in July,[27] but in Niger the appeals went "almost completely unheard." [28]

Niger is facing insurgencies both at home and from transnational attacks along its borders. The French-led Operation Barkhane is working in coordination with the G5 Sahel Joint Force to target the Islamic State in the region, especially in the Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger border area [29]. The ongoing high level of violence and the government's limited capacity to provide security across the vast territory can only lead to a negative evaluation of the prospects for religious freedom in Niger.

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Jihadists attack Christians in Niger

By Paolo Beckett

Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) – (02.07.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3hhNVVL> - ACN has received news of a jihadist attack on Fantio and Dolbel, two towns in the Tillabéri region in southwestern Niger. Survivors of the attack fled to the Dori region of Burkina Faso, sources told ACN. It is a group of women with small children and babies. According to these witnesses of the attacks, the terrorists attacked the towns twice, killing the men. The two towns were abandoned by the rest of the inhabitants.

In Fantio, the jihadists took a statue of the Virgin Mary, liturgical books and musical instruments and burned them. They then desecrated the Blessed Sacrament by throwing the sacred hosts on the ground and finally setting the church on fire. This is the third parish in this part of Niger that has been abandoned due to terrorist attacks and incursions by extremist groups. Survivors of the attacks flee to Niamey, seek refuge in the parish of Téra, or cross the border into the Diocese of Dori in Burkina Faso.

Islamist terrorist groups began to extend their reach into Burkina Faso and Niger in 2015. According to ACN's Religious Freedom in the World Report 2021, the area has become one of the hotspots for militant jihadism in Africa. In the meantime, the number of internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso has grown to about one million.

ACN has been supporting the Catholic Church in Burkina Faso by helping those who have experienced Islamist violence to return to normal life. Accordingly, a primary focus of its relief efforts is on projects that work to alleviate the impact of trauma.

Photo : IDPs in the Kaya region of Burkina Faso
