



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **44.7%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **28.9%**
- Muslims : **26.0%**
- Others : **0.4%**

11,372,000

114,763 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

For several years, Benin has been subject to a growing threat from Islamic jihadism.^[1] This type of extremism has already triggered a spiral of violence in a number of neighbouring countries. Jihadist Islamism has caused great concern in Benin as well, even though no major attacks have been perpetrated within the country itself. That is why Benin joined the African deployment force of several thousand troops that fought the Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram in Nigeria, Benin's neighbour to the east. In all, Benin has sent 793 soldiers, 361 gendarmes and 20 military experts to nine international peace missions worldwide, with a focus on Africa. It also provides support to the UN deployment force stationed in northern Mali, whose mission is also to fight Islamist terrorism.^[2]

There is no tradition of religious fundamentalism in Benin itself, either in terms of legislation or the practice of religion in the population. The country's constitution defines Benin as a secular state that prohibits religious discrimination. Religious freedom is enshrined as a fundamental human right and is considered a core principle of interreligious interactions.^[3] People who wish to establish a religious community must present their request to the Ministry of the Interior and have their group registered. Registration requires submission of a variety of official documents and payment of the equivalent of around US\$80. If a religious group is not registered but active, the Ministry of the Interior will proceed to close down that group's facilities until proper registration has been completed.

The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools under the country's constitutional principle of separation of state and religion.

Religious diversity in Benin is probably among the broadest in the region. The state respects this pluralism. During the reporting period, government officials attended dedication ceremonies, funerals and other religious events held by a variety of religious groups.^[4]

Relations between religious communities are considered peaceful.

Some 17 percent of the population engage in voodoo, a widespread practice in West Africa. Muslims and Catholics are roughly equal in numbers.^[5] A small section of the population belongs to the Celestial Church of Christ, a Christian community with teachings strictly based on the Bible. It was founded in 1947 in Benin and is now represented in several other West African countries as well.

In practice, there is a great deal of overlap among the different denominations. Some Christians and Muslims also practise voodoo, although not always openly.^[6] Syncretism can be found among all social strata across the whole country, and is generally accepted. It can even be found within the same family – without causing significant tensions or conflicts.

Incidents

There was no change in the tradition of peaceful interreligious relations in Benin during the reporting period, nor any reports of acts of violence. As indicated, in 2015 the country affirmed its commitment to religious tolerance and harmonious coexistence by sending troops into neighbouring Nigeria to join the fight against Boko Haram.

Prospects for freedom of religion

Since a multiparty system was introduced in the early 1990s, Benin has experienced no fewer than four transfers of power through general elections – in 1991, 1996, 2006 and again in 2016, when businessman Patrice Talon, once an ally of former President Thomas Boni Yayi, soundly defeated the latter's prime minister, Lionel Zinsou, in a run-off election on 20th March 2016 with more than 65 percent of the vote.^[7] The elections again confirmed that Benin is one of the more politically stable West African nations.

As far as the Catholic Church in Benin is concerned, external influences are less of a problem than the superficial observance of the faith. Although Catholicism continues to grow, during an ad limina visit to Rome by the Benin bishops in April 2015, Pope Francis said that religious practice in the country “is sometimes superficial and lacking in soundness”.^[8] He went on to say that a “profound knowledge of the Christian mystery may not be the exclusive right of the elite^[9] and must be accessible to all believers. This is all the more important as the bishops in Benin should be “vigilant regarding the numerous ideological and media attacks.^[10] An intact marriage and family life, he pointed out, are essential. Pope Francis continued: “I know that the pastoral care of marriage is still difficult, bearing in mind the actual, social and cultural situation of your people”, but he urged the bishops not to become discouraged. “[T]he family the Catholic Church defends is a reality wanted by God.”^[11]

The Catholic Church in Benin is considered a moral authority, not just on theological questions, but in social and political matters as well. Many people in Benin still vividly recall the visit by Pope Francis' predecessor, Benedict XVI, in 2011. Many non-Catholics had a positive view of the visit and saw it as the beginning of a new religious awareness.

As Benin's clear stance against Islamist violence suggests, the country may increasingly become the target of West African-based jihadist organisations.^[12]

Endnotes / Sources

[1] Cristina Silva, 'Boko Haram Vows to Impose Sharia Law in Nigeria, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Mali,' Newsweek US edition, 20th March 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/boko-haram-vows-impose-sharia-law-nigeria-benin-cameroon-chad-niger-and-571054>, (accessed on 11th February 2018); Isabella Hermann, 'Unheilvolle Allianzen', Auslandsinformationen de Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 13th July 2017, <http://www.kas.de/wf/de/33.49532/>, (accessed 27th March 2018).

[2] 'Außenpolitik' (Foreign Policy), Auswärtiges Amt (German Foreign Ministry), <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/benin-node/-/209034>, (accessed 27th March 2018).

[3] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Benin', International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 27th March 2018).

[4] Ibid.

[5] For the share of different religious communities in the total population, cf. Grim, Brian et. al. (eds.), Year book of International Religious Demography 2017, Amsterdam/Boston.

[6] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, op. cit.

[7] Munzinger Archiv 2018, <https://www.munzinger.de/search/start.jsp>, (accessed 27th March 2018).

[8] Pope Francis, 'Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Benin on their "ad limina" visit', Libreria Editrice Vaticana, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/april/documents/papa-francesco_20150427_ad-limina-benin.html, (accessed 27th March 2018).

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Cristina Silva, op. cit.