



Burkina Faso

Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **54.2%**
- Christians : **23.9%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **21.3%**
- Others : **0.6%**

18,634,000

272,967 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The constitution of the Republic of Burkina Faso defines the country as a secular state that grants no privileges to any religious denomination and guarantees its citizens freedom of religion.^[1] Like many other nations in the region, Burkina Faso is characterised by great religious diversity, with Muslims in the clear majority.^[2]

It remains to be seen whether violent Islamist groups, coming mainly from Mali but also from other West African states, will gain a permanent foothold in Burkina Faso. The various religious communities in the country have traditionally maintained good relations with one another.

Religious groups may register with the authorities but are not required to do so. Those that do are subject to the same legal requirements as apply to other (secular) organisations.^[3]

Religious instruction is not permitted in state-run schools. The country also has Muslim, Catholic and Protestant primary and secondary schools. Educational facilities have free reign in personnel matters, but the appointment of headmasters must be reported to the authorities.^[4] The government reviews the curricula of religious schools for religious orientation and compliance with professional standards. But, since many Quranic schools in Burkina Faso are not registered, state control is far from exhaustive.^[5]

Muslim, Catholic, Protestant and animist communities receive government subsidies equivalent to approximately US\$ 120,000 each year. They also receive assistance for various programmes and projects that, in the government's view, promote the common good or the national interest in the field of education.

A commission is currently working on the draft of a new Constitution.

| Incidents

There have been relatively few jihadist attacks in Burkina Faso to date, but those that have occurred have been particularly violent. The West African country was still in the crosshairs of Islamist terrorism during the reporting period.

On 2nd March 2018 there was a series of coordinated attacks in the capital, Ouagadougou,^[6] including several cars and suicide bombers against the French Embassy and Burkinabé army headquarters. There were at least 16 dead and 100 injured. Claiming responsibility was the “Group to support Islam and Muslims” led by Malians and is linked to Al-Qaeda.

Previously, a terrorist attack on 16th January 2016 had left 30 people dead in a restaurant and hotel in Ouagadougou. Another restaurant in the city was attacked on 13th August 2017. The perpetrators indiscriminately fired machine guns at passers-by. The attack claimed the lives of 20 people.^[7] The target of the attack, Café Istanbul, was particularly popular with foreigners. According to the Burkinabé government, this was probably a jihadist terrorist attack.^[8]

Burkina Faso is one of the poorest countries in the world. In the north, it borders on Mali, which has long battled Islamist extremists. According to experts, the threat of domestic terrorism is also on the rise in Burkina Faso. For instance, the radicalised preacher Ibrahim Malam Dicko has already claimed responsibility for attacks on soldiers and civilians. His organisation, Ansarul Islam, is classified as a terrorist group by the Government of Burkina Faso.^[9]

The attack in January 2016, in which terrorists and numerous hostages were trapped for several hours in Hotel Splendid, was also claimed by another terrorist organisation called al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).^[10] There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the terrorists sought to use the attack as a show of strength in a country that, up until then, had been recognised and respected around the world for the peaceful coexistence of its various ethnic and religious groups.

In addition to Mali, Burkina Faso also shares borders with five other countries in West Africa: Niger, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Benin and Togo. There is a danger that crisis and political instability will spread to the entire region. Moreover, violent jihadist groups in West Africa are increasingly operating across national borders; these organisations include Boko Haram, a terrorist militia active mainly in Nigeria but responsible for attacks in Niger and Cameroon as well. From the north, the country is under threat from the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group.^[11] The neighbour to the west, Mali, has been in a state of crisis for years, as Islamist terrorist groups wreak havoc in that country.^[12] As a consequence, the small country of Burkina Faso is threatened by jihadism from virtually all sides.

In light of the transnational terrorist threat in the Sahel region, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad are working together with the French military to combat jihadism within their borders as part of “Operation Barkhane”. In February 2017, the same five West African countries agreed to establish a common counter-terrorism force.^[13]

The Catholic Church in Burkina Faso and in neighbouring countries has, for a long time, actively promoted peace and reconciliation.^[14] Cardinal Philippe Ouédraogo, Archbishop of Ouagadougou, has called on people to face the security crisis in Burkina Faso with courage. He explained: “In this situation, all citizens are responsible for the future of the country.”

| Prospects for freedom of religion

Following the election of the country's new president, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, a Catholic with extensive international experience, many people see signs of hope. The elections were peaceful and fair. President Kaboré took office on 29th December 2015.^[15] The terrorist attacks in 2016, 2017 and 2018 do not change fundamentally the country's optimistic attitudes with regard to the peaceful coexistence of religions. Meanwhile, winning the fight against jihadism will take time.

Endnotes / Sources

- [1] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Burkina Faso', 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).
- [2] Munzinger Archiv 2018, <https://www.munzinger.de/search/start.jsp>, (accessed 27th March 2018). For the share of different religious communities in the total population, cf. Grim, Brian et. al. (eds.): Yearbook of International Religious Demography 2017, Brill: Leiden/Boston, 2017.
- [3] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, op. cit.
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] 'Sahel militants claim deadly twin attacks in Burkina Faso', Channel NewsAsia, 4th March 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/sahel-militants-claim-deadly-twin-attacks-in-burkina-faso-10010888>, (accessed 3rd April 2018); 'Burkina Faso's capital hit by co-ordinated 'terror' attacks', Irish Times, 2 March 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/burkina-faso-s-capital-hit-by-co-ordinated-terror-attacks-1.3413044>, (accessed 3rd April 2018).
- [7] 'Viele Tote bei Angriff auf Restaurant in Ouagadougou', Zeit Online, 14th August 2017, <http://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2017-08/burkina-faso-ouagadougou-anschlag>, (accessed on 11th February 2018).
- [8] 'Bewaffnete stürmen Restaurant – mindestens 17 Tote', Spiegel Online, 14th August 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/burkina-faso-tote-bei-angriff-auf-restaurant-cafe-istanbul-in-ouagadougou-a-1162716.html>, (accessed on 11th February 2018).
- [9] 'Viele Tote bei Angriff auf Restaurant in Ouagadougou', op. cit.
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Kersten Knipp, 'Islamic State' seeks new foothold in Africa, Deutsche Welle, 2nd January 2018, <http://www.dw.com/en/islamic-state-seeks-new-foothold-in-africa/a-41977922> (accessed on 11 February 2018).
- [12] Munzinger Archiv, op. cit.
- [13] Ibid.
- [14] 'Mali is the epicenter of jihadist groups that rage in Sahel', Agenzia Fides, 14th December 2017, http://www.fides.org/en/news/63399-AFRICA_MALI_Mali_is_the_epicenter_of_jihadist_groups_that_rage_in_Sahel, (accessed on 11th February 2018).
- [15] Munzinger Archiv, op. cit.