



Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **56.7%**
- Christians : **35.2%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **7.1%**
- Others : **1.0%**

14,497,000

1,284,000 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

According to the constitution of 14th April 1996 (amended in 2005),^[1] which is based on the French model, Chad is a presidential republic with a multi-party system, but it has highly autocratic traits.^[2] The country's constitution was drafted by the Conférence Nationale Souveraine (CNS, Sovereign National Conference) during a three-year transitional period. On 31st January 1996, it was ratified in a referendum with 61.5 percent of the vote. However, the work which the CNS did on the constitution was made more difficult by the fact that first it had to come to terms with a past marked by violent conflicts.

Later, in the early 2000s, the ruling party, the Mouvement Patriotique du Salut (MPS, Patriotic Salvation Movement), sought to amend the constitution by removing the two-term limit on presidential office. The head of the MPS, Idriss Déby, who is also the current president of the country, has been in power without interruption since 1990. In the most recent presidential election in 2016, he was re-elected with nearly 60 percent of the votes.^[3] Practically all opposition parties signed a joint declaration against him.

The constitutional amendment was adopted by the country's parliament in May 2004 and ratified by referendum on 6th June 2005. Allegations of electoral fraud were repeatedly made throughout the referendum process and have continued even long afterwards.

The constitutional amendment took away all hope among Chadians and the opposition that the regime might change. There have been repeated rebel attacks and coup attempts against the government since, even from within its own ranks. To date, however, Déby, who considers himself the sole guarantor of stability and development, has been able to repel them. He intends to continue to rule Chad, together with his party, indefinitely. In 2016, Déby was standing for re-election once again after 25 years in office. In contrast to the 2011 elections, however, a large majority in the opposition

did not boycott the elections.

Article one of Chad's constitution establishes the principle of secularity and the separation of state and religion.^[4] Article five prohibits any propaganda that seeks to impede "national unity or the secularity of the State", and this includes propaganda "of ... religious character". In article 14, the state guarantees all citizens "equality before the law without distinction of origin, of race, of sex, of religion, of political opinion or of social position".^[5] Article 27 mentions freedom of religion as one of the freedoms that may be restricted only in the interest of the freedoms and rights of others, or in the interest of public order and morals. Article 51 makes military service compulsory while article 54 states: "One may neither invoke religious beliefs or philosophical opinions to avoid an obligation dictated by the national interest." The effect is that objections to military service for reasons of conscience are not allowed.^[6]

In keeping with the principle of a secular state, religious education is prohibited in public schools. Religious groups may, however, operate schools of their own. The wearing of burkas (or religious head coverings that cover the entire face) is prohibited.^[7]

Incidents

Religious groups in Chad typically enjoy good relationships, particularly in the south of the country. Delegations of Muslims and Christians regularly attend one another's religious celebrations and feast days.^[8]

However, there are two social developments in particular which have led repeatedly to tensions, violence, or bloodshed. As a consequence of these two trends, and following serious attacks by Islamist groups in previous years, there has been no improvement in the situation of religious freedom in Chad during the period under review.^[9] First, Islamist groups exist within Chad's Muslim population. Second, jihadist fighters have come from abroad seeking to destabilise Chad.^[10]

Up to 10 percent of Muslims are thought to have Islamist tendencies, adhering to Salafism or Wahhabism, a strict interpretation of the Qur'an originating in Saudi Arabia.^[11] These hard-line Muslims repeatedly come in conflict with moderate Muslims.^[12] The absence of Salafists from the government-instituted High Council for Islamic Affairs (HCIA) is viewed as problematic within the Islamic community.^[13]

The Regional Forum on Interfaith Dialogue, which is composed of representatives of the Islamic community, Protestant churches and the Catholic Church, convenes several times a year in order to promote religious tolerance and combat prejudices towards people of other faiths.^[14]

There have been repeated armed clashes involving the Islamist terrorist organisation Boko Haram, which operates from Nigeria in the region around Lake Chad. This region is strategically located between four countries: Chad, Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon. Here, Boko Haram is easily able to retreat and hide.^[15] Its fighters operate in the border area but live on islands on the Nigerian side. They can penetrate neighbouring countries and invade villages before retreating back to the islands.^[16] People from Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad have been drawn to the same region, fleeing either poverty or Boko Haram. Some 2.3 million displaced persons are said to live there now.^[17]

Chad and three other African countries – Niger, Nigeria, and Cameroon – are militarily engaged against Boko Haram, fielding a total force of 9,000 soldiers.^[18] The fighting often claims lives.^[19] A Chadian army statement reported an operation by its troops against the terrorist group on five Nigerian islands in Lake Chad. Encounters with Boko Haram in late June 2017 resulted in the deaths of eight Chadian soldiers and 162 Boko Haram fighters.

On 23rd March 2018, 20 Boko Haram fighters were killed in clashes with Chadian soldiers.^[20] According to the Chadian army, the fighting took place on an island in Lake Chad. One Chadian soldier was killed, and five others wounded.

Father Franco Martellozzo, a Jesuit priest who has lived in Chad for more than 50 years, states that, even though Boko Haram has not gained a foothold in the country, militant extremism is a source of concern.^[21] The cross-border spread of

Islamist terror poses a particular threat to Christians living in the region. In the current crisis, the missionary points out, the Catholic community remains hopeful and provides human, spiritual and material assistance “to meet the needs of the people, particularly the weakest and the needy”.[22]

Prospects for freedom of religion

The threat of Islamist jihadism is not the only factor that makes it difficult for people in Chad to exercise their right to religious freedom without restrictions. Their situation is compounded by extreme poverty. Indeed, according to Chad’s Catholic Bishops, the country is in real economic and social difficulty.[23]

At a political level, the Bishops complain that there is a “lack of dialogue” among the government, the opposition, the institutions and the civilian population which poses “a serious threat to democracy”. At an economic level, as an oil-producing nation, Chad relies on exports for revenue. The Catholic bishops note that this has meant that “the country has lost its agricultural and pastoral vocation”.[24]

Mismanagement of oil revenues and the “brutal fall in international oil prices” have shown, “as expected, the fragility of [the] economy.” Lack of interest in the agricultural sector, combined with increasing desertification, have led to many “bloody conflicts between shepherds and farmers, causing human and material losses.”[25]

In early 2018 the country’s main trade unions called for an indefinite general strike against government austerity and cuts in civil servants’ salaries made following lower oil revenues.[26] Trade unions denounced not just the wage cuts but the prohibition and repression of peaceful initiatives by the authorities, such as the use of tear gas when police broke up student protests in the Chadian capital city, N’Djamena. Some 100 protesters were arrested in that incident.[27]

Against a backdrop of strong social and political tension, the Catholic Church in Chad was calling on the population and the authorities to “contribute to the common good, and to overcome the crisis, without succumbing to the temptation of violence or despair,” said Father Martellozzo.[28]

Compounding the difficulty is the still-unresolved problem of refugees in eastern Chad, which borders on the crisis-torn region of Darfur, in Sudan.[29] According to various reports, more than 400,000 vulnerable refugees found shelter in 14 camps in this part of the Sahel, ranked among the largest in Africa, and were reliant on humanitarian assistance. The camps have become permanent. Managed by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), they are funded almost exclusively by the European Union.

Endnotes / Sources

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