



## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Muslims : **87.9%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **9.7%**
- Christians : **2.2%**
- Others : **0.2%**

18,135,000

1,240,192 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The constitution of Mali, considered one of the most liberal in the Muslim world,<sup>[1]</sup> declares Mali to be a secular state that guarantees all citizens the same rights, regardless of their religious affiliation.<sup>[2]</sup> The secular nature of the state is enshrined in Article 2 of the 1992 constitution: “All Malians are born and live free and equal in their rights and duties. Any discrimination based on social origin, colour, language, race, sex, religion, or political opinion is prohibited.” Article 4 states: “Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, worship, opinion, expression, and creation in respect to the law.”<sup>[3]</sup> Mali’s constitution clearly and unequivocally guarantees the right to freedom of worship and the right to profess one’s faith through individual or communal acts of worship.

In June 2017, Mali’s National Assembly adopted a draft constitutional amendment to strengthen the presidency, among other things. This proved controversial, and in the face of political opposition party and groups in civil society, in August 2017 President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita announced that the government was dropping the proposed constitutional amendment.<sup>[4]</sup>

Mali’s Penal Code also follows a fundamentally liberal approach. It holds that every form of discrimination on the basis of religion is as punishable as the violation of freedom of religion.<sup>[5]</sup>

The security situation in Mali remained very unstable during the reporting period. Various Islamist terrorist groups such as the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) wielded their influence in Mali as well!<sup>[6]</sup> The poor security situation also causes problems not least for religious minorities who, due to their small numbers, are in some respects among the most vulnerable groups in Malian society.<sup>[7]</sup>

The country’s vast landmass in the Sahel extends from the Sahara in the north to the wet savannah in the south.

Following a military coup in March 2012, the country was plunged into chaos from which it has not yet recovered. When jihadists and rebel groups threatened to overrun the entire country, France – the former colonial power until 1960 – intervened militarily<sup>[8]</sup>, and in early 2013, with the backing of African forces, French troops recaptured the north of the country. The French subsequently handed responsibility over to MINUSMA,<sup>[9]</sup> the UN stabilisation mission, though they continue to maintain a powerful anti-terror unit in Mali. France is at the head of the 4,000-strong Barkhane mission<sup>[10]</sup> under which Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad cooperate with the French military. Their shared objective is to combat the cross-border terrorist threat in the Sahel region. In addition, in February 2017, the countries of the ‘G5 Sahel’ – Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Niger and Chad – agreed to create a joint West African anti-terror force, with financial support provided by Saudi Arabia, among others.<sup>[11]</sup>

The large international military engagement in Mali and its neighbours demonstrates how great the danger of jihadism was during the reporting period – and is likely to remain in future. Mali is predominantly Muslim Sunni. Almost 13 percent of the population belong to other religions. Christians constitute just over 2 percent, two thirds are Catholic and one third is Protestant. Mali is also home to adherents of traditional African religions (almost 9 percent); some Muslims and Christians also incorporate African traditions into their ritual observances.<sup>[12]</sup> While the southern part of the country is considered relatively safe, the situation in the north remains tense. There are threats of terrorist attack in connection with smuggling activities.

## Incidents

According to the German-based human rights organisation, the Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker (GfbV), the Society for Threatened Peoples,<sup>[13]</sup> the Malian military has been overwhelmed by the need to protect the civilian population. At least 78 people lost their lives in terrorist attacks in northern and central Mali from early January to mid-February 2018 alone.<sup>[14]</sup> According to GfbV, 31 people were killed on 27th January 2018 when Islamist militants attacked a military camp near the city of Timbuktu. Two days earlier, on 25th January 2018, 26 civilians were killed when their bus hit a landmine. To make matters worse, according to GfbV, the Tuareg conflict in the north of the country is – at the time of writing – still not over, despite a peace deal signed in 2015.

Mali’s army is also losing troops every week. According to GfbV, in 2017 716 soldiers were killed and 548 security forces wounded in the country’s embattled northern and central regions. For UN peacekeepers as well, no theatre of operations in the world is more dangerous than Mali: 21 armed members of the UN peacekeeping mission and seven civilian employees of the UN died in 2017.<sup>[15]</sup>

Muslim and Christian officials have repeatedly condemned the violence<sup>[16]</sup> to which are exposed not only Christians, but in many cases moderate Muslims as well. They remind observers of the long tradition of peaceful coexistence of Mali’s religious and faiths groups.<sup>[17]</sup>

## Prospects for freedom of religion

As in many other countries in West Africa, the situation of religious freedom in Mali is closely linked to the local security situation. If jihadism and the criminal activity associated with it – afflicting members of all of the country’s religions and denominations – can be stopped, the situation for the Christian minority will in all likelihood improve. This assessment is also supported by the fact that the peaceful coexistence of religions in Mali has a long tradition and is still observed in many parts of the country in spite of all the violence. Reconciliation thus remains possible.

Mali’s small Christian minority has welcomed the international military commitment to stabilise the country. Monsignor Edmond Dembele, General Secretary of the Episcopal Conference of Mali, commented on this in the media in late 2017.<sup>[18]</sup> The creation of West African forces to fight jihadism is a sign of hope, not only for Mali but for the entire sub-Saharan region. Monsignor Dembele expressed his support for the resolution creating the ‘G5 Sahel’ peacekeeping force for West Africa to stabilise the region (see above). For months, according to Monsignor Dembele, the security situation in a

number of areas of Mali has been alarming.

The G5 troops' headquarters are in Bamako, Mali, but – at the time of writing – they are also due to be deployed in Niger and Burkina Faso. Monsignor Dembele stated: “We had hoped that, with the signing of the peace agreement of Algiers in June 2015, the conditions for the pacification and stabilisation of the country would have been created.”<sup>[19]</sup> He added: “In fact, for a few months after the signing of the agreement, we experienced a moment of relative peace. But for about a year we have witnessed a return to insecurity, especially in the centre of Mali and even in the capital Bamako, where there have been attacks.”<sup>[20]</sup>

In fact, alongside jihadism, there is another central factor that plays a role in shaping the country's fate, namely smuggling.<sup>[21]</sup> Indeed, solving the conflict in the north is made much more difficult by a flourishing smuggling trade.<sup>[22]</sup> In addition to migrants and merchandise, weapons and drugs are trafficked as well, and new international routes for drug smuggling continue to be uncovered. In 2009, the discovery in the desert of northern Mali of an aircraft used to transport cocaine from Latin America attracted a great deal of international attention.

Whether the presence of foreign troops in Mali will stop or even reverse the spread of criminal activities and jihadism in the region remains an open question. “Mali is our Afghanistan,” the French newspaper *Le Monde* claimed in November 2017.<sup>[23]</sup> The patterns were similar in both countries: first, military success (northern Mali was retaken by French troops in 2013), then a failed reconstruction effort, followed by the gradual spread of a new uprising led by forces more brutal and politically astute than the last. The reasons are complex: the commitment of the Western forces can be expected to decline in the long term – due in large measure to loss of confidence in local partners. Local authorities, on the other hand, are marginalised by their Western protectors. The outsiders tell them what to do even though they do not understand local conditions – such as how to deal with clans, tribes, political factions or militia.<sup>[24]</sup> Meanwhile, jihadism continues to grow.

## Endnotes / Sources

[1] Cf. Munzinger Länder: Mali, Munzinger Archiv 2018, <https://www.munzinger.de/search/start.jsp>, (accessed 30 March 2018).

[2] The Constitution of the Republic of Mali Constitution, World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ml/ml004en.pdf>, (accessed 17th February 2018).

[3] Ibid.

[4] ‘Mali’, Das Länder-Informations-Portal (LIPortal), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), <https://www.liportal.de/mali/geschichte-staat/#c976>, (accessed on 17th February 2018).

[5] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, ‘Mali’, International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 2nd April 2018).

[6] Munzinger Archiv 2018. Op. cit.

[7] Ibid.

[8] ‘Mali country profile’, BBC News, 28th June 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13881370> (accessed 17th February 2018).

[9] Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations unies pour la stabilisation au Mali (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali).

[10] ‘Terroristen bei Einsatz des französischen Militärs in Mali getötet’, Neue Zürcher Zeitung Online, 14th February 2018, <https://www.nzz.ch/international/terroristen-bei-einsatz-des-franzoesischen-militaers-in-mali-getoetet-ld.1357463>,

(accessed 17th February 2018).

[11] Cf. Munzinger Archiv 2018, op. cit.

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

[13] Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker, <https://www.gfbv.de/en/>, (accessed 14th April 2018).

[14] 'Mali: Gewalt nimmt weiter zu', Vatican News, 28th January 2018, <http://www.vaticannews.va/de/welt/news/2018-01/mali-gewalt-nimmt-weiter-zu.html>, (accessed 17th February 2018).

[15] Ibid.

[16] An overview of the numbers of civilians and soldiers killed can be found in Wikipedia. See 'Northern Mali conflict, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern\\_Mali\\_conflict](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Mali_conflict), (accessed 2nd April 2018).

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

[18] '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](http://www.fides.org/en/news/63399-AFRICA_MALI_Mali_is_the_epicenter_of_jihadist_groups_that_rage_in_Sahel), (accessed 17th February 2018).

[19] 'Church in Mali welcomes international stabilization force', Crux, 29th December 2017, '<https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2017/12/29/church-mali-welcomes-international-stabilization-force/>

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

[21] Ibid. 'These groups are linked to illegal trafficking (weapons, drugs, cigarettes, human beings) that are concentrated in the center of Mali. These are very lucrative trades and smugglers like jihadists have an interest in sowing chaos to prevent the State from controlling the area to enforce the law,' Dembele pointed out.

[22] Das Länder-Informations-Portal, op. cit.

[23] 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 17th February 2018).

[24] Ibid.