

Niger



Persecution / Worsened ↓

Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **95.7%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **3.9%**
- Others : **0.4%**

20.715.000

1.267.000 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The constitution of the “Seventh Republic”, dated 25th November 2010,^[1] guarantees, among other things, separation of powers, decentralisation, a multi-party system and general civil and human rights.^[2] According to the constitution, the Republic of Niger is a secular state. The law provides for a clear separation of state and religion. Respect for all faiths is enshrined in article 8 of the constitution which enshrines equality of all people before the law, regardless of religious identity. Article 9 states: “[...] 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.”^[3] Religious communities must register with the authorities.

The country’s president, prime minister and the president of the parliament must take a religious oath when they are installed in office. The oath depends on the individual’s personal religion. Conversion is permitted. Larger public events with the aim of proselytising are prohibited, however, for security reasons.^[4]

Muslims represent the vast majority of the country’s population. There are also small Christian religious communities of Catholic and Protestant denominations. Religious instruction in state-run schools is prohibited. Schools with religious sponsors require the approval of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Education.^[5] The Ministry of Religious Affairs in Niger is responsible for inter-religious dialogue.

Incidents

In terms of the threat posed by Islamist jihadism, the situation in Niger stabilised during the period under review. However, because of its central location in West Africa, its size and proximity to the centres of Islamist jihadism in West

Africa, the country remains under an acute threat. In recent years, Islamist organisations have used the opportunities granted under the constitution to gain a further foothold in the country.^[6] These include, for example, Wahhabi groups to which the pluralistic principles enshrined in the constitution are utterly foreign. These groups fear a presumptive blurring of religious identity in Niger through the country's secular, democratic state system. According to media reports, numerous Wahhabist centres have emerged in Niger in recent years.^[7]

The small Catholic community in Niger is concentrated in the Archdiocese of Niamey (in the capital) and the Diocese of Maradi. It enjoys an excellent reputation for its social commitment and charitable work. The Catholic Church operates numerous social institutions and schools.^[8]

Relations between Muslims and other religious communities in the country have traditionally been good. Muslims and Christians regularly visit one another for major religious celebrations. The interfaith forum of Muslims and Christians is active in all parts of the country and promotes cooperation between religions and religious communities.^[9] Bibles written in Arabic and in the leading local languages are easily available.

According to the relief agency Open Doors, there are three groups of Christians living in Niger that are affected by persecution.^[10] These include Christians who are members of traditional churches, Christians of Muslim origin and Christians who belong to Protestant free churches. At times, only Christians of Muslim origins suffer. One form of this is when a Christian is expelled from his or her family and loses his or her inheritance rights. There are cases of kidnapping and forced marriage as well. Sometimes all three groups of Christians are affected when, for instance, rental of housing or business premises is involved.

According to information provided by Open Doors, the persecution of Christians has grown in some parts of the country but has declined in other parts.^[11] The situation for Christians has improved somewhat in the capital, Niamey. The situation is becoming increasingly difficult for Christians, however, and for businessmen in particular, in areas with strong Islamist influence, such as Diffa. The situation is worsening in the Diffa and Tahoua regions because some areas there have fallen under the control of militant Islamic groups. Christians are reportedly bullied by ordinary citizens in regions such as Zinder. In Maradi, Tahoua, Dosso, Niamey and Tillabery, on the other hand, a government-organised initiative to promote more peaceful cohabitation between Muslims and Christians has reduced the burden of such harassment.

In an interview with Domradio in Cologne, Archbishop Laurent Lompo reported that the Catholic Church in Niger experienced "some difficulties" following publication of the Mohammed cartoons by Charlie Hebdo, during the time prior to the bloody 7th January 2015 attack on the satirical magazine. Churches in Niger were being set on fire at the time. But they have now been rebuilt and are larger than before. Christianity is "advancing step by step and is now at a stable level", the Archbishop said.^[12]

On 5th October 2017, an attack was carried out in Niger in which four American soldiers and five soldiers of the army of Niger were killed. The organisation "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" was most likely responsible for the crime.^[13] The attack occurred as a mixed patrol unit of American and native soldiers made its way to a meeting with chiefs in the south-west of Niger, on the border with Mali. At least 50 heavily armed men in pick-ups and on motorcycles attacked the soldiers. Father Mauro Armanino, an Italian-born Catholic African missionary working in Niger, reported that some regions in Niger were not stable due to the presence of foreign troops. Various attacks had been carried out, he reported, in a region located some 120km from Niamey. This region along the border with Mali has been unstable for a long time. Another area that is not stable is Lake Chad, where the Islamists of the Islamist-jihadist organisation Boko Haram from Nigeria are active. Also unstable is the region along the border with Libya, where human trafficking occurs.^[14]

In June 2016, in the Nigrin city of Bosso on the banks of Lake Chad, there was unrest between indigenous soldiers and Islamist jihadists from Nigeria, Niger's neighbour to the south. Boko Haram fighters had taken over the city in early June. On 4th June, the forces of the government in Niamey retook the city, but it was again occupied by Boko Haram fighters in the days that followed. The battle claimed the lives of soldiers from Nigeria and Niger. 50,000 of the city's residents – children, women and the elderly in particular – were forced to flee the city into the stifling heat and without any

Prospects for freedom of religion

The country's economic development has a decisive influence on security in Niger and thus on the state of religious freedom as well. There is good reason to expect jihadist groups and organisations to have less success in recruiting young people in future, provided that the effort to effectively combat poverty and create opportunities for young people succeeds. As the Catholic priest Father Mauro Armanino, who is working in Niger with the Society of African Missions, reports: "National school education is in an advanced stage of being dismantled. Health care and public finances are disastrous, and political life is full of endless scandals and corruption. All this is in the context of an extended state of emergency in various parts of the country because of terrorist attacks. The 2018 financial announcement that civil society fears could put citizens on the knees has contributed to awakening it from the fatal sleep it seemed to have fallen in."^[16]

Western troops are stationed in Niger and the country has now become a strategically important in the effort to combat migration to Europe. Meanwhile, in light of the transnational terrorist threat in the Sahel region, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Chad and Niger are working together with the French military to combat jihadism in these countries as part of "Opération Barkhane". In February 2017, the countries of the so-called 'G5 Sahel' began building a joint West African anti-terror force with financial support coming from countries including Saudi Arabia.^[17] Their shared objective is to combat the cross-border terrorist threat existing in the Sahel region. Whether the presence of foreign troops in Niger will lead to cessation or even reversal of the spread of crime and jihadism in the region remains an open question.

Hopes regarding the stabilisation of the security situation lie in the long tradition of peaceful religious coexistence in Niger. In spite of the influence of jihadist organisations, there is a deep awareness within the population that more can be accomplished by working together for peace than can be achieved by war.^[18] As Archbishop Djalwana Laurent Lompo of Niamey emphasises: "We have good relations with the Muslims who are moderate. They come to our churches, and we visit them. You cannot generalise that Islam is bad; there are some individuals who have failed to understand anything. Dialogue helps us understand each other; it breaks down barriers. When Christians and Muslims meet, we try not to let hatred surface at all; this is how we do it in our schools, for instance, where we encounter one another in a spirit of openness."^[19]

Endnotes / Sources

[1] Niger's Constitution of 2010, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Niger_2010?lang=en), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Niger_2010?lang=en, (accessed on 31st March 2018).

[2] Munzinger Archiv 2018, Munzinger Länder: Niger. www.munzinger.de/search/login, (accessed on 31st March 2018).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Niger', International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed on 31st March 2018).

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] 'Der Dialog reißt Barrieren nieder' ['Dialogue breaks down barriers'], interview by Christian Schlegel with Archbishop Laurent Lompo (Archbishop and Metropolitan for Niamey in Niger), Domradio, 11th August 2016, <https://www.domradio.de/themen/weltkirche/2016-08-11/erzbischof-lompo-aus-niger-zum-islam>, (accessed on 31st March 2018).

2018).

[9] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom – Niger, op. cit..

[10] Open Doors, Länderprofil Niger, <https://www.opendoors.de/christenverfolgung/weltverfolgungsindex/laenderprofile/2018/niger>, (accessed on 31st March 2018).

[11] Ibid.

[12] 'Der Dialog reißt Barrieren nieder', interview with Archbishop Laurent Lompo (Archbishop and Metropolitan for Niamey in Niger), loc. cit.

[13] 'A surprise attack against US soldiers: "The presence of foreign soldiers is likely to destabilize the area", says a missionary', agenzia fides, 9th October 2017, http://www.fides.org/en/news/63036-AFRICA_NIGER_A_surprise_attack_against_US_soldiers_The_presence_of_foreign_soldiers_is_likely_to_destabilize_the_area (accessed on 31st March 2018).

[14] Ibid.

[15] 'Critical situation for the 50,000 inhabitants of Bosso who escaped from Boko Haram', agenzia fides, 9 June 2016, http://www.fides.org/en/news/60198-AFRICA_NIGER_Critical_situation_for_the_50_000_inhabitants_of_Bosso_who_escaped_from_Boko_Haram, (accessed on 31st March 2018).

[16] 'Guerrilla in Niamey: the testimony of a missionary', agenzia fides, 31st October 2017, http://www.fides.org/en/news/63163-AFRICA_NIGER_Guerrilla_in_Niamey_the_testimony_of_a_missionary, (accessed on 31st March 2018).

[17] Cf. Munzinger Archiv 2018, loc. cit., and Knipp, Kersten: '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 31st March 2018).

[18] 'Der Dialog reißt Barrieren nieder', interview by Christian Schlegel with Archbishop Laurent Lompo (Archbishop and Metropolitan for Niamey in Niger), op. cit..

[19] Ibid.