



SENEGAL

Quick Facts

Population: 16,082,442 (July 2021 est.)

Area: 196,722 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Wolof 37.1%, Pular 26.2%, Serer 17%, Mandinka 5.6%, Jola 4.5%, Soninke 1.4%, other 8.3% (includes Europeans and persons of Lebanese descent) (2017 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$23.576 billion (2019 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2021)

INTRODUCTION

Although the Republic of Senegal borders the Republic of Mali and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, both of which have been plagued by violent Islamist activity, there have been minimal signs of jihadist terrorism in Senegal to date. Senegal is a participant in the United States-led Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and has won some praise for its efforts to counter regional extremism and terrorist financing while also promoting a localized Islam that is both moderate and tolerant. Geographically, however, Senegal presents a potential backdoor for radical, jihadist Islam, and although it has not yet been hit by a major terrorist attack, President Macky Sall has acknowledged that his country is not immune from the threat.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Some non-violent Islamism exists in Senegal, a nation where Sufi Muslim brotherhoods characterize cultural and political life, and local political expressions of Islam have not been revolutionary since the pre-independence era. Sufis believe that transforming society proceeds through purification of the personal soul. Sufism emphasizes pilgrimages and the guidance of religious authorities. The presiding caliph of the Mouride brotherhood, one of Senegal's largest, resides in Touba, a city east of Dakar that was constructed around tombs of significant Muslim religious figures. Moral integrity of the order is maintained by political authorities at a distance.¹

This structure has not translated into a clear separation of religion and politics, however. Rather, “[t]he dynamics of religion and politics in Senegal have created relationships of dependence and cooperation between the government and the Sufi leaders and preserved peace and stability in the country.”² In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, former President Abdoulaye Wade hosted an antiterrorism summit at which he called on African nations to sign a declaration denouncing terrorism. More recently, current President Macky Sall has warned that Senegal is not immune to Islamism and reinforced the nation's embrace of tolerant Islam. He has also called for a coordinated response by regional governments to terrorist threats that goes beyond military action.³

However, Senegal's insufficient security capabilities could invite trouble. The Trans-Sahara Counter

Terrorism Program of the United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM) conducts exercises that aim to strengthen the ability of regional governments to counter terrorism.⁴ However, the capability of Senegal's own security forces to detect and respond to violent events linked to militant Islamist groups is inadequate and, while it is improving, officials frequently lament a dearth of border resources and regional cooperation with neighboring countries as potential liabilities.⁵ Senegal's borderlands are porous and could serve as points of entry and operation for jihadi Islamists operating in Mauritania, Mali, and elsewhere in the Sahel region. This terrorist threat imposed by external actors is larger than internal fundamentalist ideologies. Senegal's backing of counterterrorism initiatives in the Sahel, most notably its contributions to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and its support of Western counterterror efforts, has left some worried that the country might eventually be an attractive target for retaliation by extremists. Groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Boko Haram have exploited Sahel-Saharan regional vulnerabilities to establish a broader operational presence.⁶ This was first substantively demonstrated in 2012, with reports of Senegalese nationals among the rank-and-file of AQIM and its affiliates in Mali. There was also a minor uptick in arrests on suspicion of links to terrorist networks in Senegal, both involving Senegalese and foreign nationals. Mankeur Ndiaye, who served as Senegal's Minister for Foreign Affairs from 2012 to 2017, acknowledged the existence of dormant terrorist cells in the country in 2013.⁷ Since then, such activity is said to have increased.

In 2015, Nigerien authorities arrested Makhtar Diokhane, the ringleader of a group of jihadi fighters who helped to recruit Senegalese militants for Boko Haram and other terror organizations across the subregion. Senegalese authorities later arrested his wife and family members of other Senegalese nationals tied to terror groups in the Sahel.⁸

As attacks increased in frequency and severity across the sub region, Senegalese authorities cracked down on perceived threats. In 2016, they arrested over 500 people.⁹ In 2018, a special court in Dakar sentenced over a dozen suspected jihadi militants for providing support to terror groups in the Sahel, including Diokhane who received twenty years in prison.¹⁰ It was the country's largest terrorism trial to date, and the severity of the punishment underscores the Senegalese government's seriousness in rooting out the threat of terrorism. To many, these events shattered assumptions that Senegal is immune to the spread of Islamism and exposed a largely unknown pipeline of Senegalese militants to terror cells across the Sahel.

More recent events have served to confirm these views. In January 2021, Senegalese authorities arrested a number of men in connection with a *jihadist* cell known as *Katiba Macina*. The arrest was notable, insofar as *Katiba Macina* is known to be one of the key armed factions in the Al Qaeda-aligned Group to Support Muslims (GSIM) – suggesting that GSIM has begun to establish itself in Senegal.¹¹ Amadou Kouffa, the leader of *Katiba Macina*, urged the Fula people to take up arms and Senegal and join his fight on both sides of the common border between Senegal and Mali.¹² Senegal has also struggled with the question of illicit finance, including terrorist funding, leading the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to add the country to its watch list in February of 2021.¹³

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

About 96 percent of Senegal's 15 million citizens are Muslim. The remaining population is Christian or animist. Currently, virtually all of Islam in Senegal is represented by two of the four main Sufi orders: the Tijaniyyah and the Muridiyyah, or Mourides. Followers support specific marabouts, or "holy men," a common phenomenon in West Africa. In Senegal, the marabout system is highly organized and hierarchical, more so than elsewhere in the region. Individuals become members through family inheritance and by continuing allegiance to a particular marabout. Sufis learn and recite a prayer litany, known as the *wird*, from their marabout. Knowledge of Islam is limited by what the marabouts profess, so membership in a Sufi brotherhood does not require much knowledge about Islam.¹⁴ The marabout system allows for

regionally dominant groupings, but does not cause much friction in Senegal.¹⁵

The approximately 20 indigenous ethnic groups in Senegal do not follow religious lines. The Wolof group is the largest, constituting 37.1 percent of the population. The Fula group represents about 26.2 percent, and the remainder belong to the Serer (17 percent), the Mandinka (5.6 percent), the Jola (4.5 percent), the Soninke (1.4 percent), and a mixture of other groups, including expats of mostly European and Lebanese descent (8.3 percent), along with other small ethnic groups.¹⁶ Most Senegalese people speak the Wolof language. Ethnic conflict is minimal and largely confined today to the Casamance, where low-level conflict between the government and independence fighters has been ongoing since the early 1980s.¹⁷ A debate about the Islamic nature of Senegal has waxed and waned since the country's independence in 1960. In the early 1990s, people worried that Islamic reformist beliefs posed a threat to the historic connection of organized Sufism and Senegalese politics.¹⁸ Religious overtures during the administration of former President Abdoulaye Wade saw other activist groups make religious advances. Two Islamist movements in particular – the Dahirat al-Mustarshidat and the Mouvement Mondial pour l'Unité de Dieu – disassociated themselves from the traditional Sufi centers during President Wade's administration and challenged state power.¹⁹

A few years ago, these groups claimed or reported hundreds of thousands of followers.²⁰ However, these figures are probably exaggerated. While still loosely tied to the traditional system of Sufi orders and their religious leaders, the newer Islamist leaders are innovative in their teachings. They preach almost exclusively to youth, whose environment (they claim) is not conducive to Islam as they are too influenced by the West.

Although Senegal prohibits political parties from identifying with religion, the law does not specify if religious movements are allowed to form parties with no explicit religious reference.²¹ Several reformist groups – including the *Parti de la Vérité pour le Développement* (PVD; Party of Truth for Development), the *Parti de la solidarité sénégalaise* (PSS; Party for Senegalese Solidarity), the *Parti de l'Unité et du Rassemblement* (PUR; Party of Unity and Togetherness), among others, have formed political parties, distinguishing themselves from other political movements and further blurring the line between ideology and religion.²² Modou Kara, the founder of the PVD, claimed that he was asserting his rights as a citizen and not acting as a marabout by forming a political party. In speeches, these reformists occasionally refer to Arab religious leaders and groups, hinting at a connection to a wider network of Muslims. They view Islam as defining all aspects of life, although they stop short of calling for an Islamic Republic. They “excoriate both Marxism and liberalism, but the third way they want to impose is not Islamism properly speaking, but their own conception of a social and political Islam adapted to the order to which they belong.”²³

Numerous foreign actors have further complicated this line between ideology and religion, with several Arab states eager to make their mark on Senegal's tolerant Islam. Chief among them are the Gulf states, some of which fund Islamic institutions across the country in a clear fight for influence.²⁴ Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Turkey are just some of the countries pouring money into mosques, schools, and other Islamic institutions across the country.²⁵ Iran, for its part, has pushed Shi'a Islam and funded university programs teaching Farsi, Islamic Science, and Iranian culture and history.²⁶ This contest for influence is already proving to be disruptive in a country that has long been known for its political moderation and religious tolerance. Some of this tolerance has historically been credited to the fact that Christians and Muslims coexist in the same institutions. Indeed, Léopold Sédar Senghor, the country's first president, championed Islamo-Christian dialogue and cooperation, crafting a new nation “built upon the philosophical foundations of an African socialism that was at once secular and spiritualist.”²⁷ However, with many Islamic schools becoming competitive and largely inaccessible to Christians, there is a risk that this inter-religious dialogue could become a thing of the past.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Senegal today appears to be sliding ever so slightly toward Islamism. External factors, including rising investments from Arab states with more conservative approaches to Islam, and internal issues, such as pent-up socioeconomic frustrations, are contributing to this shift.

A popular sentiment in Senegal is that the state drives people towards radicalization, rather than Sufi brotherhoods or external actors,” as its representatives are corrupt and fail to take effective action to reduce unemployment and poverty.”²⁸ With approximately 60 percent of Senegal’s population under the age of twenty, and youth unemployment remaining stubbornly high, the country’s internal demographic challenges could be exploited by Islamists.

The government has taken steps to reduce future threats. In 2016, it formed the Inter-Ministerial Framework for Intervention and Coordination of Counterterrorism Operations, which aims to coordinate the government’s disorderly response mechanisms to terrorist threats. It is also working to improve law enforcement mechanisms and upgrade its tools to detect and deter terrorists. These efforts include working with the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States, and intergovernmental organizations to improve cooperation between border agencies and communities and enhance overall border security.²⁹

These initiatives have bred some success. For example, when the authorities got word of a plot to attack a hotel in Dakar in October 2017, the security services, in collaboration with Western intelligence agencies, were quick to respond.³⁰ Still, some feel the government’s efforts to combat terrorism have been insufficient; the fact that Islamism and possible future terrorist attacks are both taboo topics of discussion is unhelpful.³¹

The *marabouts* maintain considerable influence among their followers, despite their lack of organization into one cohesive group. However, they have lost some ground secular matters. Nonetheless, these groups are arguably the main reason Senegal has managed to stave off the kind of the avalanche of violence, radicalization, and fundamentalism that other parts of the region have experienced. They retain entrenched economic positions, especially in certain food and livestock industries, and remain central to any semblance of tolerance in Senegalese society.

The Office of the President is another area where flirtations with a more Islamic state might emerge. They seldom follow through on promises to recalibrate the relationship between the state and Sufi brotherhoods. Former President Abdoulaye Wade, for example, exempted them from taxes, offering discounted land, provided their leaders with diplomatic passports, and appeared in traditional garb. While his successor, President Macky Sall, seemed less favorable to religious influences initially, he has largely followed suit. Sall has used government funds to renovate religious buildings; in 2017, he argued that the state “cannot function without religion,” before kneeling to Cheikh Sidy Mokhtar Mbacké, the former caliph of the Mouride movement. Marabouts remain deeply influential in a political process that continues to separate (though occasionally permit) religious influence from secularism.

These actions could be an attempt to more fully co-opt religious leaders. Indeed, one may argue that former President Wade, and to a lesser extent President Sall, hoped to centralize power and cover up a dearth of progress vis-à-vis inclusive economic growth and development. While the country has moved forward since President Sall took office in 2012, highlighted by a lofty set of long-term economic development initiatives, the need to placate religious authorities is still very real.

Religious instruction within schools is another potential opening for Islamism. The state has a relatively weak grip on Islamic education throughout the country; indeed, much of it is largely disconnected from public education. Of note, Senegal’s Daara (Koranic schools) have attracted much criticism from foreign governments and non-governmental organizations. Parents across Senegal and the subregion send their children to these institutions to study the Quran under marabouts. Students, known as *talibé*, are often required to beg on the streets during the day to raise money for their marabouts, some of whom maintain

loose connections to militant Islamist organizations. These establishments are outside of the state's framework, receive little to no oversight, and have been compared to modern day slavery.

President Sall has promised to "impose fines and jail sentences" for marabouts sending children to beg; however, despite laws criminalizing forced begging, numerous interactions between police and Koranic teachers, and efforts to ensure students are not radicalized, little real progress has been made.³²

Despite societal shifts hinting at a potential slide towards Islamism, the movement has no mainstream support in Senegal. Intellectuals and other leaders of the current ruling class overwhelmingly support secularism.³³ Nevertheless, some groups have become increasingly dissatisfied with the current political system and have protested ineffective governance accordingly. The Y'en a Marre ("Fed Up") movement spearheaded by Senegalese rappers and journalists to mobilize youth voters around the 2012 elections, the widespread protests against a new law that opposition parties say is an attempt to silence political opponents, and the more than 53,000 people that contested Khalifa Sall and Karim Wade's exclusion from the ballot box earlier this year are just some of the many examples.³⁴ Economic frustrations also cannot go unnoticed. While Senegal's economy has grown by close to seven percent per year for several years, and the discovery of natural gas has pointed to even brighter economic futures, many feel the fruits of this growth have yet to trickle down to the disenfranchised.

The soundness of Senegal's economy, coupled with the viability of its democracy, is a greater threat to the country's secular-religious balance than a radical Islamist minority at present. Radical Islamist groups and militants have indeed emerged, initially inspired by the 1979 Iranian Revolution and more recently by the contours of Islamism in the Sahel-Sahara arc. However, they remain in the minority. Although many Sufi brotherhoods and reform groups also share the Islamists' opposition to U.S. and European regional policies, they seldom advocate for the de-secularization of the state. Movements that do embrace reformist sentiments derived from the Arab world are mixed, at times even discordant, in their advocacy of the creation of an Islamic republic in Senegal.

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