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Covid Restrictions and Religious Freedom in Africa ***

*Restrizioni Covid e libertà religiosa in Africa ****

ABSTRACT: COVID-19 based restrictions on places of worship and religious gatherings were present in 31 of 49 countries examined in Sub-Saharan Africa between 2019 and 2022. While patterns differed slightly across religious traditions, a majority of both Muslim-majority and Christian-majority countries enacted and enforced this type of restriction at some point during this period. In a large majority of these countries there was some resistance to the restrictions. By the end of 2022 all of them were lifted so these restrictions on places of worship and religious gatherings did not permanently impact religious freedom in the region and appear to be largely temporary government actions linked to the pandemic.

ABSTRACT: Le restrizioni basate sul COVID-19 sui luoghi di culto e sulle riunioni religiose sono state presenti in 31 dei 49 paesi esaminati nell'Africa subsahariana tra il 2019 e il 2022. Sebbene i modelli differissero leggermente con riguardo alle tradizioni religiose, la maggior parte dei paesi, sia a maggioranza musulmana sia a maggioranza cristiana, ha promulgato e applicato questo tipo di restrizioni in qualche momento durante questo periodo. Nella grande maggioranza di questi paesi si è riscontrata una certa resistenza alle restrizioni. Entro la fine del 2022 tutte le restrizioni sono state revocate, quindi queste restrizioni riguardanti i luoghi di culto e le riunioni religiose non hanno avuto

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un impatto permanente sulla libertà religiosa nella regione e sembrano essere in gran parte azioni governative temporanee legate alla pandemia.

SUMMARY: 1. Literature review - 2. The Nature and Extent of COVID Restrictions - 3. The Nature and Extent of COVID Restrictions - 4. Countries where the Covid Restrictions were Accepted by Religious Communities - 5. Countries Where there was Resistance to the Closures - 6. Conclusions.

This study examines the extent and consequences of COVID-19-based restrictions on religious organizations, places of worship, and religious gatherings in 49 sub-Saharan African countries between 2019 and 2022. We focus on the nature and duration of the restrictions as well as the backlash against them rather than the normative and legal issues involved. Our basic questions are how common were these restrictions? How long did they last? How much resistance was there to these restrictions? Did patterns differ across different religious traditions? Finally, did they have any lasting impact on religious freedom¹.

Overall these restrictions were common and present in 31 countries at some point in this period. This includes countries which specifically required the closure of places of worship or otherwise banned religious gatherings due to COVID-19 related issues between 2019 and 2022. It does not include countries which only engaged in a general lockdown where people were prevented from leaving their place of residence altogether. These closures were slightly more common in Christian-majority than in Muslim majority countries but were present in a majority of both types of countries. Resistance against these restrictions was also slightly more likely in Christian-majority countries as compared to Muslim-majority countries but was present in at least

¹ The data presented in this article is based on the Religion and State project. For more on the project see J. FOX, R. FINKE, D.R. MATAIC, *New Data and Measures on Societal Discrimination and Religious Minorities in Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, vol. 14 (14), 2018; J. FOX, *Building Composite Measures of Religion and State in Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, vol. 7 (8), 2011, pp. 1-39; J. FOX, *The Correlates of Religion and State*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2019; J. FOX, *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State: A Time Series Analysis of Worldwide Data*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Also see the project webpage at <https://ras.thearda.com/>.



three quarters of countries in both categories. They all ended by the end of 2022.

Given this, in practical terms the COVID-19 restrictions appear to have had no permanent on religious freedom in the region and were limited to the duration of the pandemic. That being said, the issues and controversies raised by these restrictions may have a long-term impact on the discussion of appropriate government restrictions on religious freedom in the region.

1 - Literature review

In 2020, global restrictions on religious gatherings raised questions regarding the extent to which governments could restrict religious freedom to protect the wider public. Around the world, many countries banned or limited public gatherings to slow its spread. Among sub-Saharan African countries, lockdowns and other public health measures affected religious groups, and they responded in various ways. In 15 sub-Saharan African countries, that is 31% of the regional countries, Pew identified at least one of the following: (1) *governments used force* to impose limits on religious gatherings; (2) governments, private groups or individuals publicly *blamed religious groups* for the spread of the coronavirus; or (3) *private actors engaged in violence or vandalism* against religious groups, linking them to the spread of COVID-19. As we discuss below, 30 of these countries restricted places of worship and religious gatherings at some point².

Majumdar reports that in sub-Saharan Africa, harassment and intimidation - including derogatory statements, physical violence and prohibitions on religious practices and rituals - were reported in 44 of the region's 48 countries (92%). In Nigeria, for example, some Muslim and Christian groups contended that state laws discriminated against them. The Anglican Church claimed that new mandates for burial rituals in Anambra state violated religious freedom provisions of the constitution and were enacted without input from the church. In Tanzania, some religious leaders reported they were pressurized to support the country's

² PEW RESEARCH CENTER, *How COVID-19 Restrictions Affected Religious Groups Around the World in 2020* (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/11/29/how-covid-19-restrictions-affected-religious-groups-around-the-world-in-2020/> Accessed 27 November 2024).



president and/ or they faced government penalties if their public statements were deemed overly political. According to the U.S. State Department, reported by Pew, Tanzania's government threatened to deregister such religious organizations while, in some cases, their citizenship was questioned and leaders' passports confiscated (Majumdar 2022)³.

Sub-Saharan Africa is a region with two main religions, Christianity and Islam, both of which have been in the region for centuries. In recent years, the public role of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa has gained increased attention from scholars⁴. Wild-Wood, Grant, Adedibu, Barnard, Ojore and Way⁵ describe four examples of African churches' responses to the challenge of COVID-19 in the pandemic's early weeks, as the virus spread throughout the region. In many African countries, churches are at the forefront of formal and informal health delivery and disease control, via both medical services and faith healing. Wild-Wood et al examine Christian communities' differing approaches to the pandemic which illustrate the influence and the limits of Christian action when regional governments sought to act quickly and decisively to reduce the pandemic's spread. Wild-Wood et al employ several research methods (including remote interviews and surveys, and analysis of authors' own denominations or congregations) in agreement with physical distancing measures. The authors describe how churches sought to undertake their religious mission during a time when governments were putting in place measures to prevent the spread of disease. During this time, many churches managed to maintain worship services, often moving them online. This may have helped African Christians make sense of the pandemic not least by churches offering themselves as public trust repositories. They were not always successful, Wild-Wood et al report, especially when they sought to carry out their

³ S. MAJUMDAR, *How COVID-19 Restrictions Affected Religious Groups Around the World in 2020*. Pew Research Center, 2022 (https://www.smc.global/wp-content/uploads/documents/PF_2022.11.29_restrictions_REPORT.pdf Accessed 27 November 2024).

⁴ J. HAYNES, *Christian Nationalism and Politics in Ghana*. in *Religions*, vol 14, (9) 9. 2023.

⁵ E. WILD-WOOD, L. GRANT, B. ADEDIBU, A. BARNARD, A.S OJORE, Y. WAY, *The Public Role of Churches in Early Responses to COVID-19 in Africa: Snapshots from Nigeria, Congo, Kenya and South Africa*, in *Studies in World Christianity*, vol. 27 (1), 2021.



social responsibility, as many Christian institutions were compelled to close as part of the measures to restrict the range of Covid-19.

Bulama Bukarti describes how the coronavirus pandemic affected major Muslim collective events such as Friday prayers, Ramadan observations, and Hajj, not only in sub-Saharan Africa but also globally. In some regional countries, interreligious tensions were exacerbated by the health crisis and its economic and societal effects. In general, the pandemic had significant impact on African Muslims' daily life, culture and politics, and, like their Christian counterparts, Muslim communities responded to Covid-19 in various ways. *Bulama Bukarti* reports that as COVID-19 outbreak begins to spread in earnest in sub-Saharan Africa, so-called *jihadi* groups sought to try to take advantage of the crisis to unleash violence and recruit members. Governments, development workers, and aid agencies were quickly aware of this threat and took steps to try to deny *jihadi* groups the ability to recruit new followers. In addition, the pandemic delayed deployment of an additional 250 British troops scheduled to join the effort against violent extremists in the Sahel region, that is, the transition zone between the more humid Sudanian savannas to its south and the drier Sahara to the north, incorporating. The Sahel region includes 10 countries - Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria - and most of them are Muslim-majority nations. More generally, COVID-19 at least temporarily pushed the effort to counter *jihadi* extremism in sub-Saharan Africa down the list of Western countries' priorities. According to *Bukarti*, this undermined attempts to counter *jihadi* groups, allowing them more space to operate⁶.

Obasa, Singh, Chivunze, Burgess, Masiye, Mtande, Ochieng, Chalwe, Mokgatla, Rebnnie and Moodley (2020) look at government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to six African countries (Malawi, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana). The authors highlight ethical concerns arising in these contexts, including in relation to religious freedom. They argue that there was a need to balance individual autonomy with broader issues of public interest and safety, including in relation to religious freedom in the six countries. While, they contend, public health measures were undertaken with best interests of

⁶ **B. BUKARTI**, *How Jihadi Groups in Africa Will Exploit COVID-19*. Council on Foreign Relations. 3 April 2020 (<https://www.cfr.org/blog/how-jihadi-groups-africa-will-exploit-covid-19> Accessed 27 November 2024).



communities at the centre of concerns, in Malawi, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana, the ethics of implementation were poorly communicated, not widely understood and, in some cases, compromised⁷.

Both religious and non-religious entities expressed their concern about restrictive government measures in response to the threat of COVID-19, believing that they had a significant impact on citizens' rights and livelihoods. An open letter to the Southern Africa Development Community⁸ from Amnesty International, the Advancing Rights in Southern Africa programme managed by Freedom House, the Southern Africa Litigation Centre and the Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network to the Southern Africa Development Community and member states, expressing concern about restrictive government measures in response to the pandemic. The four organisations called on governments in the region to adhere to applicable human rights standards, including in relation to religious communities, when taking necessary measures to address the crisis⁹.

A Pew Research Center report¹⁰ discovered that in several African countries, authorities used force against religious groups, *including physical assaults, when they were believed to be going against preventive Covid-19 restrictions introduced by government*. Pew reports that in Comoros and Gabon, police used tear gas to disperse religious gatherings that they believed violated COVID-19 lockdown rules. Pew also noted that human rights organisations in Zambia claimed that on occasion police used excessive force against religious groups when enforcing COVID-19 rules. In April 2020, for example, police assaulted a group of church leaders in a town called Mkushi where they had gathered in violation of public health guidelines.

⁷ A.E. OBASA, S. SINGH, E. CHIVUNZE, T. BURGESS, F. MASIYE, T. MTANDE, J. OCHIENG, V. CHALWE, B. MOKGATLA, S. RENNIE, K. MOODLEY, *Comparative strategic approaches to COVID-19 in Africa: Balancing public interest with civil liberties*, in *South African Medical Journal*, Vol. 110 (9), 2020, pp. 858-863.

⁸ The Southern Africa Development Community member states are: Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe

⁹ FREEDOM HOUSE, 2020 (<https://freedomhouse.org/article/sadc-restrictive-covid-19-regulations-presenting-concerning-ramifications-enjoyment-human> Accessed 27 November 2024).

¹⁰ PEW RESEARCH CENTER, *How COVID-19 Restrictions*, cit.



Dube explains that governments in sub-Saharan Africa, including that of South Africa, the regional economic powerhouse, responded to Covid-19 by declaring a state of disaster and imposing restrictions on travelling and public assemblies. South Africa's government declared significant lockdown regulations, which prohibited religious groups and congregations from meeting for religious purposes. Some of South Africa's Muslims were especially aggrieved by the government regulations, claiming they were both irrational and unreasonable, with serious ramifications for religious freedom. Concerned Muslims launched a constitutional challenge in the High Court in the case of *Mohamed and Others v President of the Republic of South Africa and Others*. In this case, Dube explains, the High Court had to deal with the novel issue of the limitation of rights in the context of a pandemic, as well as the rights of religious minorities¹¹.

In their chapter in an open access volume, *Religion, Law and COVID-19 in South Africa*, edited by Fortune Sibanda, Tenson Muyambo, and Ezra Chtoiando, Helens van Coller and Idowu A. Akinloye¹² argue that the spread of the pandemic in South Africa occasioned the state's regulatory responses which, they claim, restricted constitutionally guaranteed human rights, including various freedoms: movement, association, religion and the right to human dignity. Generally, the South African government's Covid-19 restrictions touching on religious freedom led to a sustained public debate. Van Coller and Akinloye employ a doctrinal research approach through analysis of literature, statutes and case examples, enabling them to evaluate state regulations enacted to curb the spread of the COVID-19 in South Africa vis-à-vis the constitutional provisions protecting freedom of religion in the country. They argue further that some aspects of the regulations covering a total or partial ban of religious gatherings in the wake of the outbreak of the

¹¹ A. DUBE, *Restrictions on Freedom of Religion in the Time of National Disaster - Lessons from Mohamed and Others v President of the Republic of South Africa and Others*. In *South African Yearbook of International Law* 48, 'Afrika's transformation aspirations through the eyes of decolonisation - From rhetoric to action', 2023 (<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SAYIL/article/view/14932> Accessed 27 November 2024).

¹² H. VAN COLLER, I.A. AKINLOYE, *Religion, Law and COVID-19 in South Africa*. In F. SIBANDA, T. MUYAMBO (eds.), *Religion and the COVID-19 Epidemic in Southern Africa*, London, Routledge, 2022 (<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003241096-6/religion-law-covid-19-south-africa-helena-van-coller-idowu-akinloye> Accessed 27 November 2024).



COVID-19 were normatively permissible limitations of religious freedom.

Turning to the west Africa state of Ghana, one of Africa's few consolidated liberal democracies, Charles Prempeh (2020) assesses the impact of the government's Covid-19 regulations on religious freedom. Prempeh's goal is to discuss the role religions in Ghana played in assisting government efforts to stem the spread of Covid-19. Focusing on the ubiquity of religions in Ghana, Prempeh argues that religious experts in Ghana employed "their ability to invoke the transcendental being to compel adherents to comply with the lockdown rules, as well as follow precautionary measures to fight the virus in Ghana"¹³. At the same time, Prempeh avers, in the face of the Covid-19 crisis, the state passed a law that many believed was inimical to Ghana's religious freedom. Methodologically, Prempeh

"draws on critical reflections on electronic and social media reports about religion and humanitarian services in Ghana to argue that religions are bridging the mundane and spiritual gaps to aid the state, while the state is also creatively engaging religions to invest in prayers and also pass laws that are potentially inimical to the future of religious freedom"¹⁴.

One of Ghana's neighbors, the regional giant, Nigeria, confirmed its first case of Covid-19 on 27 February 2020. The occasion was when an Italian citizen on a business trip from Milan, arriving in Nigeria on 25 February 25, tested positive for the virus. A month later, governments at both the federal and state levels, sought to intensify measures to contain the contagion. By this time, Jacinta Chiamaka Nwaka explains, there were 27 confirmed cases of the virus in Nigeria. Like elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, there were widespread concerns in Nigeria that the fragile public health-care system of Africa's most populous country, with a population of 200 million people, would not cope well with a rapidly spreading, life-threatening, pandemic. As elsewhere in the region, it was realized that only quick and effective actions, including restrictions on religious freedom, were necessary to prevent many, perhaps millions of

¹³ C. PREMPEH, *Religion and the state in an episodic moment of COVID-19 in Ghana*, in *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, Vol. 4, (1), 2021, p. 1.

¹⁴ C. PREMPEH, *Religion and the state*, cit.



Nigerians, from being infected and, when infected, provide treatment to Covid-19 sufferers. There were also fears that in Nigeria, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, Covid-19 would exact a heavy toll on the country's economy¹⁵.

As COVID-19 spread rapidly across sub-Saharan Africa, it soon became clear that the pandemic caused serious and significant problems to millions of people, exacerbated by economic disruption and already fragile healthcare systems. It became evident, Obasa, Singh, Chivunze, Burgess, Masiye, Mtande, Ochieng, Chalwe, Mokgatla, Rennie and Moodley note, that despite standardised global health strategies, national and local government responses should be tailored to their individual settings for maximum effect. Many sub-Saharan African countries adopted stringent measures which included national lockdown and quarantine or isolation. This was combined with government advice on good hand hygiene, as well as the mandatory wearing of masks and physical distancing, deemed essential to avoid healthcare crises linked to Covid-19. The impact of such measures in many regional countries was to buy time for healthcare facilities to prepare for planned COVID-19 cases, perhaps running into the thousands or even millions. Yet, not only were some measures challenging to implement they were also in many regional countries associated with sometimes serious violations of individual rights, including religious freedom, due to abuse of power on the part of the authorities as well as lapses in implementation of well-intentioned policy. While individuals complying with lockdown regulations often embraced an acceptance of the concept of the common good, including in relation to restrictions on religious freedom, the relatively sparse extant literature on religious restrictions linked to the Covid-19 pandemic in sub-Saharan African countries, indicates that many citizens found the transition from individualism to collective thinking required during a pandemic difficult to navigate, including in relation to the ability of religious entities to function under newly-imposed, albeit in many cases temporary, state controls¹⁶.

¹⁵ J.C. NWAKA, *Between Religious Freedom and the Public Good: Reactions to Religious Restrictions to Prevent the Spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria*, Kujenga Amani, 2020 (<https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2020/05/20/between-religious-freedom-and-the-public-good-reactions-to-religious-restrictions-to-prevent-the-spread-of-covid-19-in-nigeria/> Accessed 27 November 2024).

¹⁶ OBASA, S. SINGH, E. CHIVUNZE, T. BURGESS, F. MASIYE, T. MTANDE, J.



2 - The Nature and Extent of COVID Restrictions

As shown in tables 1 and 2, 31 of the 49 sub-Saharan African countries in this study enacted COVID restrictions that applied to places of worship. This does not include countries which had general lockdowns where people were not allowed to leave their homes at all but rather countries which specifically banned or limited gatherings in places of worship, usually among other types of public gatherings. In ten of these countries these restrictions ended in 2020. In 16 they ended in 2021. The restrictions lasted into 2022 in five. (The RAS project distinguishes between Southern and Northern Nigeria because of the vastly different religion policies on these two regions of Nigeria). Thus, in all cases the restrictions were temporary and linked to COVID. They did not lead to any permanent policy changes or long-term reductions of religion freedom. Also, in nearly all cases, as best as can be determined, they were enforced equally on all religions, so there was little disproportionate impact on religious minorities. We note the few exceptions to this in the discussion below.

Table 1: Sub-Saharan African Countries with COVID Restrictions

<i>No Restrictions</i>	<i>2020 only</i>	<i>2020-2021</i>	<i>2020-2022</i>
Burkina Faso	Chad	Angola	Ghana
Burundi	Côte d'Ivoire	Benin	Mozambique
Cape Verde	Djibouti	Botswana	Niger
Central Afr. Republic	Equatorial Guinea	Cameroon	Nigeria (North)
Comoros	Guinea	Congo-Brazzaville	Nigeria (South)
Eritrea	Kenya	Congo-Kinshasa*	
Eswatini	Lesotho	Gabon	
Ethiopia	Liberia	Madagascar	
Gambia	Senegal	Mauritania	
Guinea Bissau	South Sudan	Mauritius	
Malawi		Sierra Leone	
Mali		South Africa	
Namibia		Togo	
Rwanda		Uganda	

OCHIENG, V. CHALWE, B. MOKGATLA, S. RENNIE, K. MOODLEY, *Comparative strategic approaches*, cit.



Somalia**	Zambia
Somaliland	Zimbabwe
Sudan**	
Tanzania	

*Restrictions began in 2019

** Restrictions announced but were not enforced

Table 2: Covid Restrictions by Majority Religion

	No Restrictions		Restrictions	
	#	%	#	%
Christian	9	32.1%	19	67.9%
Muslim	7	46.7%	8	53.3%
Mixed or Other Majority	1	20.0%	4	80.0%
Total	18	36.7%	31	63.3%

The details and nature of the restrictions varied. In almost all cases they included the closing of all places of worship for some period between 2020 and 2022. In most cases where religious gatherings were allowed governments required or encouraged social distancing and other health related measures such as hand washing. In Botswana, Congo-Brazzaville, Côte d'Ivoire's, Gabon, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Northern, Nigeria, Southern Nigeria, South Africa, South Sudan, and Togo it involved limiting the number of attendees allowed at a gathering for at least a portion of this period. Angola, Botswana, and Gabon at some point allowed religious gatherings only at certain times. We divide our discussion between countries where there was resistance to the restrictions and those where there was not. As shown in table 3, resistance to these measures was the norm with some resistance present in 24 countries. There is no significant relationship between the majority religion of the country and this resistance. It was less common in countries with no religious majority but the low number of such states obviates any ability to draw conclusions.

Table 3: Resistance to COVID Restrictions in Countries where They are Present

	No Resistance		Resistance	
	#	%	#	%
Christian	3	15.8%	16	84.2%
Muslim	2	25.0%	6	75.0%



Mixed or Other Majority	2	50.0%	2	50.0%
Total	7	22.6%	24	77.4%

Finally, we tested several factors using binary logistic regressions and found none of them predicted the presence of restrictions or the presence of resistance to those restrictions. These variables include, democracy as measured by the V-Dem dataset, per capita GDP, and the 2019 levels of state regulation of other minority religion, discrimination against minority religions, and support for religion from the RAS dataset.

3 - Countries where the Covid Restrictions were Accepted by Religious Communities

In many of the five of the seven countries where we found no significant resistance to the COVID restrictions, we found evidence that the government actively consulted with or cooperated with religious organizations on forming its COVID policy. While this indicated a high likelihood that this consultation contributed to this lack of resistance, as we note below such consultation as present in several of the countries where resistance occurred.

Countries in which Consultation Occurred

In Benin the government engaged in sporadic restrictions in 2020 and 2021 which were based on active discussions with religious leaders from multiple faiths. On March 21, government officials met with religious leaders from the Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim religious leaders to discuss the closure of places of worship to limit the spread of COVID. Following the meeting, all places of worship were ordered closed. In June after consulting again with religious leader, the government ended these restrictions in. This process was repeated and resulted in restrictions on all cultural, festive, sporting, and religious events as well as closing of places of worship between September 2020 and June 2021. While there was no active resistance to these policies, the Archbishop of Cotonou expressed disappointment that the government grouped places of worship with bars and restaurants as leisure services and did not consider them essential services which remain could remain open. The



government found these lockdown approaches restrictive to the economy and they were loosely enforced¹⁷.

In consultation with the country's High Islamic Commission, Congo-Brazzaville closed all places of worship from the beginning of 2020 until late July of that year when it began to allow services of up to 50 people as long as they observed social distancing, attendees wore masks, and provided handwashing stations. While violations could result in fines, no fines were assessed. The country's Islamic High Commission decided to keep Mosques closed until March 2021 because they were unable to guarantee compliance with the restrictions on attendees and social distancing. In October 2021, the government enacted a 45 person limit on weddings due to a COVID surge. Religious leaders met privately with the government over their concerns and in December 2021 this ban was lifted¹⁸.

Côte d'Ivoire's government met with religious leaders in March 2020 where the leaders agreed to a 15-day measure banning meetings of more than 50 people. Many religious groups voluntarily closed places of worship temporarily. For example, the Supreme Council of Imams of Cote d'Ivoire, the country's official Sunni Muslim association, voted to close all mosques for three months. Christian and Muslim religious leaders actively cooperated with the government in disseminating Covid prevention measures to the population and often appeared on government ads on the issue¹⁹.

¹⁷ **IMPACT NEWS SERVICE**, *Africa's Pandemic Catch-22*, 9 May, 2020 (<https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5YW6-N4P1-F0YC-N1G1-00000-00&context=1516831>); **STATES NEWS SERVICE**, *How COVID-19 Restrictions Affected Religious Groups Around the World in 2020*, 29 November, 2022 (<https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6701-63G1-DYTH-G104-00000-00&context=1519360>); **P. SESSOU, J.N.S. FODJO, C.S. JÉRÔME, S. FAROUGOU, R. COLEBUNDERS**, *Assessment of adherence to public health measures and their impact on the COVID-19 outbreak in Benin Republic, West Africa*, in *Pan African Medical Journal*, Vol 22 (38), 2021. doi: 10.11604/pamj.2021.38.293.26843. PMID: 34178212; **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2019-2023 (<https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>, cit.)

¹⁸ **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2019-2023, cit.; **AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE**, *Congo bans weddings in anti-Covid move*, 13 October, 2021 (<https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:63V4-SYX1-JBV1-X0G0-00000-00&context=1519360>).

¹⁹ **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2019-2023, cit. (<https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>).



Kenya closed all places of worship between March and June 2020. In June they began allowing places of worship to reopen with varying restrictions adjusted over time, mostly limiting the number of people allowed to attend at any one time. The government frequently met with religious leaders to consult and seek support in implementing anti-COVID measures²⁰.

Sierra Leone closed all places of worship twice, once in March of 2020 for several months and July to August 2021. In both instances both Muslim and Christian leaders and religious organizations actively supported the government policy and disciplined any clergy that publicly criticized the policy. However, they did complain that the government neither consulted with them nor informed them in advance of the 2021 closure which limited their ability to help prepare their congregations for the closures²¹.

Countries Where We Found No Evidence of Consultation.

Congo-Kinshasa closed all places of worship in December 2019. They began reopening on a province by province level based on infection rates in April 2021 with all places of worship being allowed to reopen by October 2021²².

Djibouti's government enacted general restrictions on more than ten people at a gathering in March 2020. These restrictions were gradually lifted beginning in May of that year and were entirely lifted by the end of the year²³.

²⁰ **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2019-2023, cit. (<https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>); **N. KIHU**, *Kenya Churches and Mosques to Reopen from Tuesday*, *Capital News*, 7 July, 2020 (<https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2020/07/kenya-churches-and-mosques-to-re-open-from-tuesday/>).

²¹ **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2019-2023, cit.; **THE SIERRA LEONE TELEGRAPH**, *Government of Sierra Leone Lifts Ban on Sunday and Friday Worship*, 14 August, 2021 (<https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/government-of-sierra-leone-lifts-ban-on-sunday-and-friday-worship/>).

²² **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2019-2023, cit.; **AA.COM**, *DR Congo Relaxes COVID-19 Restrictions*, 14 April, 2021 (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/dr-congo-relaxes-covid-19-restrictions/2208233>); **AA.COM**, *DR Congo Extends State of Emergency amid COVID-19*, 24 April 24, 2021 (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/dr-congo-extends-state-of-emergency-amid-covid-19/1816681>).

²³ **WORLD BANK**, *Monitoring the Impact of COVID-19 on Households in Djibouti Through*



Two countries announced restrictions but did not enforce them. While we note them here, they are not listed as having restrictions in the tables due a near total to lack of enforcement and compliance. That is, in effect, no restrictions on places of worship occurred. While Somalia issued an order to close Mosques in 2020, it was generally ignored and not enforced. However, the Health Ministry did successfully coordinate with religious leaders to help educate people about measures to fight COVID²⁴. Similarly, Sudan ordered all Mosques and Churches to be closed in March of 2020. The policy was widely ignored with little consequence other than public censure. The government then recommended social distancing and limitations on the numbers of worshipers and social distancing measures²⁵.

4 - Countries Where there was Resistance to the Closures

Resistance was common and ranged from vocal public complaints by clergy to rioting. A common, though by no means universal, theme of the complains was that secular venues experienced lower levels of restrictions than religious venues. Arguments that the closures violate religious freedom in general were not uncommon. Another form of resistance was violations of the COVID restrictions. In many cases the governments tolerated the protests and violations. In some cases they effectively addressed the complaints. However in others the government met these actions with enforcement including most commonly arrests and on occasion excessive use of force. We discuss these cases roughly in the order of the severity of the protests, resistance, and government response.

In early 2020 Lesotho's government banned in-person religious services. On August 10 the Council of Pentecostal Churches of Lesotho

High Frequency Phone Surveys, October 7, 2021 (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/djibouti/brief/monitoring-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-households-in-djibouti-through-high-frequency-phone-surveys>).

²⁴ BBC NEWS, *Fighting Al-Shabab Propaganda over Coronavirus*. 2 April, 2020 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52103799>).

²⁵ SUDAN TRIBUNE, *Sudan censures mosques for conducting Friday prayers despite coronavirus ban*, 18 April, 2020 (<https://sudantribune.com/article67341/>); *Sudan authorities warn of spread of COVID-19 during Ramadan prayers* (<https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-authorities-warn-for-spread-of-covid-19-during-ramadan-prayers>).



protested that shopping malls and other businesses had been allowed to reopen but not places of worship. The government lifted the ban shortly thereafter on August 30 when services were restricted to 50 people indoors and 100 outdoors²⁶.

Covid restrictions in Mauritius lasted between March 2020 and June 2021 including two closures of all places of worship between March and May 2020 and in March 2021. During the rest of the period the government limited the number of worshipers allowed to a maximum that varied between 5 and 50. There was some minor protest over unequally enforced measures. For example, in November 2021 three Catholic priests protested that religious services were limited to ten people while funerals were limited to 50²⁷.

Zimbabwe's government periodically closed places of worship in 2020 and 2021. In 2021 some churches protested that the government selectively enforced the covid measures because it allowed secular venues to open before churches. Also, the government allowed the Johane Marange Apostolic Church to hold a Passover celebration attended by thousands while other churches remained closed. When allowed to reopen in August 2021, the government required attendees at worship services to be vaccinated. Churches protested the lack of availability of the vaccine to many of their congregants²⁸.

Senegal closed all places of worship between March and May 2020 but required social distancing and sanitary measures. Many mosques and the Catholic Church chose voluntarily to stay closed until later that year because they found it too difficult to implement the requirements.

²⁶ US STATE DEPARTMENT, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2019-2023, cit.

²⁷ US STATE DEPARTMENT, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2019-2023, cit.; **Www.presbyterian.mu**, *Reopening of our Parishes*. 5 June 2020 (<https://www.presbyterian.mu/en/connect/news/reopening-of-our-parishes.html>); **M. MAINA**, *Churches in Mauritius to Remain Closed during Holy Week amid COVID-19 Restrictions.*, *ACI Africa*. 25 March, 2021 (<https://www.aciafrica.org/index.php/news/3112/churches-in-mauritius-to-remain-closed-during-holy-week-amid-covid-19-restrictions>); **BESAFEMORIS**, *Prime Minister Jugnauth Announces Easing of Restrictions as from 01 July 2021*, June 5, 2020 (https://besafemoris.mu/general_news/prime-minister-jugnauth-announces-easing-of-restrictions-as-from-01-july-2021/); **CRISIS24**, *Mauritius: Authorities Impose New Domestic COVID-19 Measures as of Nov. 12 2021*, 13 November, 2021 (<https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2021/11/mauritius-authorities-impose-new-domestic-covid-19-measures-as-of-nov-12-update-30>).

²⁸ US STATE DEPARTMENT, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2019-2023, cit.; **K. CHINGWE**, *COVID-19 challenges congregations, families*, in *UM News*, 9 September, 2021 (<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/covid-19-challenges-congregations-families>).



The closures prompted at least one protest by hundreds of worshippers at a Dakar neighborhood Mosque²⁹.

Madagascar imposed periodic closures of all places of worship between March 2020 and July 2021. During much of the period when places of worship were allowed to be open this was contingent on health protocols including limits on the number of worshipers allowed. The government actively consulted with leaders of the Confederation of the Christian Churches of Madagascar, representing the four main Christian churches - Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican and Presbyterian - on the implementation of COVID measures to places of worship. Nevertheless, there was some protest against the government policy. Representatives of some evangelical Christian churches stated they were marginalized in the consultations and treated unequally when requesting use of state-owned venues for public events. There were repeated protests that closure measures were enforced more strictly against places of worship than other secular venues and events. Also, during the periods where places of worship were allowed to be open, some religious leaders protested over what they considered excessive interference including protests over bans on communion³⁰.

Togo closed all places of worship between March and July 2020. After reopening the government required social distancing and limitations on the number of worshipers. In September 2021 it required all attendees to be vaccinated for COVID in order to attend services. In 2021 the government met repeatedly with religious leaders to discuss

²⁹ **VOICE OF AMERICA**, *Senegal Muslims Divided on Mosques Opening during Pandemic*, 18 May, 2020 (https://www.voanews.com/a/covid-19-pandemic_senegal-muslims-divided-mosques-opening-during-pandemic/6189502.html); **LA CROIX INTERNATIONAL**, *Catholics in Senegal can return to Mass on November 1st*, 28 October, 2020 (<https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:61J9-3VR1-JDH4-42W7-00000-00&context=1519360>); **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.

³⁰ **PRESBYTERIAN MISSION AGENCY**, *Madagascar Ministries Continue during COVID-19 Crisis*, 3 September, 2020 (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/missionconnections/letter/madagascar-ministries-continue-during-covid-19-crisis/>); **M. MADAGASIKARA**, *Andry Rajoelina - Confinement total à Analamanga le week-end, fermeture des églises et mosquées*, 19 April, 2021 (<https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:62GC-7NT1-DY15-S1R6-00000-00&context=1519360>); **THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION**, *Madagascar: Self-Sustainability Is Key for a Growing Church*, 7 January, 2022 (<http://lutheranworld.org/news/madagascar-self-sustainability-key-growing-church>); **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.



implementation of the COVID protocols. Several religious groups protested and refused to implement the vaccination measures. In response in September 2021 the government ordered a suspension of religious weddings and funerals and the closure of religious establishments initially for one month through the closure lasted until December and reopening was contingent on implementing the vaccination requirement. In September 2021, the Togolese Conference of Bishops denounced the closure of places of worship³¹.

Chad's government closed all places of worship between March and June 2020. This was part of a general closure of all places of gathering and most Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic actively supported the policy encouraging people to pray at home. There are media reports that some Wahhabi Muslim groups did not comply with the policy. In June the government shifted to social distancing measures. Catholic Churches voluntarily chose to remain closed until 2019³².

Guinea closed all places of worship in March 2020. In June they began allowing them to reopen in regions with low COVID case counts until all places of worship were allowed to reopen in September. This full reopening was justified on the grounds that the government approved numerous political rallies without proper health measures. There are reports of some mosques in Kamsar and Dubreka remaining open for prayers during the closure period³³.

Mauritania's government ordered the closure of all places of worship between March and May 2020. In July 2021 the government, in consultation with religious authorities, cancelled public prayer for the Eid al-Kebir holiday. The government arrested an Imam accused of violating the closure order in April 2020³⁴.

³¹ **ETIC: AFRICA PANDI**, *COVID 19 Situation in Togo*, 21 April, 2020 (<https://www.etic-sas.com/covid-19-situation-in-togo/>); **K. FABBI**, *Coronavirus in Togo, Opening of Air Borders and Places of Worship*, 25, September 2020, *Africa Blogging* (<https://blogging.africa/human-rights/coronavirus-in-togo-opening-of-air-borders-and-places-of-worship/>); **LA CROIX INTERNATIONAL**, *Catholics in Togo oppose vaccine requirements for attending Mass*, 18 November, 2021 (<https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:643V-4WF1-F105-V3NP-00000-00&context=1519360>); **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.

³² **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.

³³ **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.

³⁴ **FREEDOM HOUSE**, *Mauritania: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report* (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/mauritania/freedom-world/2022>).



Beginning in March 2020 through the end of 2021 Uganda's government periodically banned all public gatherings including those at places of worship. Despite consulting the Inter Religious Council of Uganda, an umbrella organization for the country's religions, there were instances of protests from religious quarters. For example, in March 2020 the government arrested a Christian minister who questioned the government's COVID policy. He was released by the court in May on the condition he make no public statements regarding COVID. During the 2021 closures criticism was more common. Some religious leaders argued that the closures restricted religious freedom and two religious leaders, an Evangelical minister and an Imam, sued the government in court claiming the closures were illegal because some commercial enterprises were allowed to remain open. It is also noteworthy that Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni used the closures as a pretext to suppress opposition through this did not impact directly on places of worship³⁵.

South Sudan temporarily closed places of worship in early 2020 through May of that year. After allowing places of worship to open the government required social distancing and limitations on the number of people at religious gatherings. There was one reported instance of resistance where police detained a local religious leader in Juba for ignoring social distancing regulations³⁶.

Mozambique's government banned all public and private gatherings including religious services between April and August 2020 as well as periodically after that through April 2022. In periods where services were allowed, the government limited gatherings to no more than 50 people and banned persons younger than 18 and older than 65 attending services. Before the resumption of religious services, Mozambique's Minister of Health met with religious leaders to coordinate and share information on safely resuming services. Thereafter, the government established a commission to monitor and inspect venues that had applied to resume services that included Muslim

³⁵ **OPEN DOORS INTERNATIONAL**, *Uganda Full Country Dossier 2024* (<https://www.opendoors.org/research-reports/country-dossiers/WWL-2024-Uganda-Full-Country-Dossier.pdf>); **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.

³⁶ **VOA AFRICA**, *Covid 19 Pandemic South Sudan Lifts Covid 19 Restrictions*, 8 May, 2020 (https://www.voaafrica.com/a/covid-19-pandemic_south-sudan-lifts-covid-19-restrictions-despite-rise-cases/6188978.html); **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.



and Christian religious leaders. The government also consulted with religious leaders on preventative measures and vaccination outreach as well as public health outreach with practitioners of traditional medicine, syncretic churches, and evangelical congregations. Nevertheless, there were multiple instances of religious groups violating this policy and in some cases the government arrested religious leaders for these violations³⁷.

Nigeria's COVID policy was similar between the Muslim-majority northern region and the Christian-majority southern region. It began with a brief lockdown in March 2020 followed by periodic closing of places of worship alternating with other measures including social distancing and limits on the number of people allowed in a gathering at a time. Some regional governments imposed stricter measures than the national government. Some Churches and Mosques in both regions ignored the closures leading to arrests of clergy. For example, in 2020, authorities in the predominantly Christian Delta State arrested three pastors for violating lockdown orders on Easter Sunday³⁸.

Throughout 2020 and well into 2021 Cameroon's government periodically closed all places of worship. For example, on April 30, 2021 Kildadi Taguieke Boukar, the governor of the Adamawa region, temporarily suspended night prayers at mosques for the final 10 days of Ramadan due to the expected large number of worshippers. There was also sporadic resistance beginning in May of 2021 when several churches, in particular those from the born-again movement, disregarded the closures prompting government orders for the closure of these groups. For example, On August 5, 2020 authorities closed the Tabernacle of Liberty Church of All Peoples in Yaounde because church leaders

³⁷ **MOZAMBIQUE NEWS AGENCY (ENGLISH)**, *Members of Unknown Religious Sect Detained in Tente*, September 15, 2021 (<https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:63MB-7C31-JDNB-7009-00000-00&context=1519360>); **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2019-2023, cit.

³⁸ **K.I. UWAEGBUTE, D.C. UNACHUKWU**, *The Upsurge of Rape during the COVID-19 Lockdown in Nigeria and Its Effects on Survivors*, in *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, Vol. 78, (3); **BAPTIST WORLD ALLIANCE**, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Churches in Nigeria", 2 May, 2021 (<https://baptistworld.org/mission-guide/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-churches-in-nigeria/>); **US STATE DEPARTMENT** *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2019-2023, cit.



reportedly encouraged members to disregard the government's pandemic measures because they claimed COVID-19 is a hoax³⁹.

After negotiations with religious leaders, Liberia ordered all places of Worship closed between March and May 2020. While the Muslim and Bahai places of worship generally followed this directive, some Christian groups initially resisted the closure. This resulted in police actions to break up the services. On March 30 the Liberia Council of Churches (LCC) and other Christian groups met and agreed to adhere to the government policy⁴⁰.

Botswana's government for the first time in its history activated its emergency powers and capped the size of and number of regular religious meetings to 50 people and twice a week between March 2020 and September 2021. Pastor Thuso Tiego of the Bethel Transfiguration Church September was arrested when he attempted to deliver to Botswana's president a petition demanding his resignation over what the pastor said was mismanagement of the COVID crisis. He also criticized the government for restricting religious gatherings at a time when individuals needed their churches for counseling and support during the pandemic. There are media reports that several of his supporters protested outside the police station where he has been held and were beaten by the police. He was released the next day without charge⁴¹.

³⁹ **CRISIS24**, *Cameroon: Police Forcibly Disperse Mosque Congregants amid COVID-19 Lockdown Measures*, 24 April, 2020 (<https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2020/04/cameroon-police-forcibly-disperse-mosque-congregants-amid-covid-19-lockdown-measures-april-24-update-5>); **ASSUMPTA.ORG** *The Covid 19 Pandemic and 'Assumption Together' from the Central Africa Region: Case of Cameroon* (<https://assumpta.org/en/news/the-covid-19-pandemic-and-assumption-together-from-the-central-africa-region-case-of-cameroon>); **C.B. ETAHOBEN**, #COVID19: Cameroon Shuts Down Churches Violating Safety Protocols, 26 March, 2021. *HumAngle* (<https://humanglemedia.com/covid19-cameroon-shuts-down-churches-violating-safety-protocols/>); **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.

⁴⁰ **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.; **THE ANALYST**, *Close Worship Centers -LCC Wants Christians Remain in Prayer Attitudes at Home*. 30 March, 2020 (<https://analystliberiaonline.com/liberian-churches-agree-to-close-worship-centers-lcc-wants-christians-remain-in-prayer-attitudes-at-home/>).

⁴¹ *Global Monitoring for Covid-19 pandemic, Botswana* (<https://global-monitoring.com/gm/pa/ge/events/epidemic-0002111.VJfJdWi2b3M.html?lang=en#:~:text=Update%202022%2D09%2D28%3A,country%20has%20also%20been%20dropped>); **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.



Zambia ordered all public gatherings including places of worship closed for most of March and April 2020. Reopening after that was contingent on social distancing measures and limits on the number of worshippers. There are reports that police used excessive force in enforcing COVID measures including assaulting church leaders from the Bread of Life International Church in Mkushi who had violated the provisions for the number of people allowed at a gathering. There are also reports that the police used COVID regulations as a pretext to harass church leaders critical of the government. The government also restricted the use of school facilities for purposes of worship which disproportionately influenced small congregations which used these facilities. These congregations protested this measure and were promised land to build churches in compensation. In 2021 relations improved with church leaders collaborating with the government to implement safety measures and the government providing relief funding to religious organizations⁴².

South Africa's government closed all places of worship in May 2020. This resulted in protests which resulted in police enforcement and arrests. In May, after consultation with the South African Council of Churches, the government implemented measures limiting the numbers of people allowed to attend religious services. These numbers varied through the rest of 2020 and into 2021. During this period there were periodic clashes between police and worshipers who opposed any restrictions on worship and resulted in arrests of worshipers and some religious leaders. Some religious advocacy groups characterized these restrictions and restrictions in the freedom of religion⁴³.

In Angola, from March to October 2020 COVID protocols required all places of worship to close. In October of 2020 recognized religious groups were allowed to open their places of worship only on Saturdays and Sundays. In November the policy was changed to also permit Friday to allow Muslims access to worship. All restrictions were lifted in March of 2021. When in force the government strictly enforced these restrictions.

⁴² **G. MUSHINGE**, *Covid-19: Zambia's Decision to Reopen Churches Condemned*, 26 April, 2020, *Africa Feeds* (<https://africafeeds.com/2020/04/26/covid-19-zambias-decision-to-reopen-churches-condemned/>); **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2019-2023, cit.

⁴³ **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2019-2023, cit.



In March of 2020 more than two-dozen Protestant religious leaders were arrested for violating the government's COVID protocol⁴⁴.

In March 2020 Equatorial Guinea suspended all religious services as part of a general ban on multiple types of gatherings. Later that year the government disbanded two religious organizations for non-compliance: the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God-Stop Suffering, run by Brazilian missionaries, and the locally based Ministry of Liberation, Health, and Prophecy. Both were allowed to reopen by the end of 2022. While this general ban was lifted by the end of the year the government restricted large celebrations by Muslims of the Eid al-Adha holiday and restricted movement between December 21 and New Years Day. This caused some controversy as the president and his wife held a Christmas Mass in their private residence. The bans on mass celebrations of the Eid al-Adha holiday remained through 2022⁴⁵.

Gabon closed all places of worship on March 12 2020, per COVID-19 protocol. Religious leaders generally supported the measures early in the year. Beginning in September when business began to re-open, the Christian community sought permission to hold services which they received on October 30. Restrictions on how often services could be held and how many people could participate remained in effect until October 2021. However, there was some sporadic resistance toward the end of this period with a disproportionate government response. For example, in September 2020 Pastor Jean Baptiste Moulacka of Libreville opened

⁴⁴ US STATE DEPARTMENT, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.

⁴⁵ US STATE DEPARTMENT, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.; GUINEA ECUATORIAL PRESS, *La pareja presidencial acude a la Misa del Gallo* (https://www.guineaecuatorialpress.com/noticias/la_pareja_presidencial_acude_a_la_misa_del_gallo) 25 December, 2021. GUINEA ECUATORIAL PRESS, *El Jefe de Estado y la Primera Dama celebran la Epifanía* (https://www.guineaecuatorialpress.com/noticias/el_jefe_de_estado_y_la_primera_dama_celebran_la_epifania); GUINEA ECUATORIAL PRESS, *Orden de la Presidencia del Gobierno sobre el Coronavirus COVID-19*, 5 March, 2020 (https://www.Guineaecuatorialpress.com/noticias/orden_de_la_presidencia_del_gobierno_sobre_el_coronavirus_covid-19); GUINEA ECUATORIAL PRESS, *Decreto Presidencial sobre las nuevas medidas de prevención del COVID-19*, 22 December 2020 (https://www.guineaecuatorialpress.com/noticias/decreto_presidencial_sobre_las_nuevas_medidas_de_prevenccion_del_covid-19); POOR-REAL EQUATORIAL GUINEA, *Revista de informacion de Guinea Ecuatorial, La Comunidad Musulmana de Guinea Ecuatorial festeja este 13 de mayo el fin del Ramadán sin la oración comunitaria*, 13 May, 2021 (<https://real.equatorialguinea.com/destacado/la-comunidad-musulmana-de-guinea-ecuatorial-festeja-este-13-de-mayo-el-fin-del-ramadan-sin-la-oracion-comunitaria/>).



his Church leading to his arrest. On October 24, the government had police patrols actively preventing the reopening of Churches and soldiers surrounded the house of The Archbishop of Libreville, who had announced the opening of Catholic Churches in his diocese and arrested two priests from the diocese. They also used teargas on local parishioners who had begun to film the road blockades. In a neighboring diocese the soldiers attached the Bishop and some priests after they concluded their services⁴⁶.

From early 2020 to 2020 Niger alternated between total lockdown, the closing of places of worship, and less severe policies such as social distancing requirements. Resistance was violent and widespread including rioting, the torching of buildings and cars, and clashes with police in which people were injured. These clashes were particularly violent during Ramadan and involved hundreds of arrests. This occurred despite multiple statements by the country's High Islamic Council which supported the COVID policy⁴⁷.

5 - Conclusions

The COVID-19 crisis was a unique event in the modern era which had many political impacts. Among them was its impact on religious freedom during the 2019-2022 period. This affords a distinctive opportunity to examine the nature of government restrictions on religious freedom.

⁴⁶ **CRISIS24**, *Gabon: Authorities Maintaining COVID-19 Restrictions Unchanged as of Sept. 27*, 27 September 2021 (<https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2021/09/gabon-authorities-maintaining-covid-19-restrictions-unchanged-as-of-sept-27-update-25>); **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.; **APANews - AFRICAN PRESS AGENCY**, *Gabon: Protracted Closure of Churches Angers Clerics*, 28 September, 2020 (<https://apanews.net/protracted-closure-of-churches-anger-gabon-clerics/>); **CATHOLIC HERALD (BLOG)**, *After Seven Months of Lockdown, Police Violently Shut down Church Reopenings in Gabon*, 26 October, 2020 (<https://catholicherald.co.uk/after-seven-months-of-lockdown-police-violently-shut-down-church-reopenings-in-gabon/>); **CRISIS24**, *Gabon: Authorities Maintaining COVID-19 Restrictions Unchanged as of Sept. 27*, 27 September 2021 (<https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2021/09/gabon-authorities-maintaining-covid-19-restrictions-unchanged-as-of-sept-27-update-25>).

⁴⁷ **US STATE DEPARTMENT**, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2019-2023*, cit.; **BBC**, *Niger Reopens Mosques, Churches*, 13 May, 2020 (<https://www.myjoyonline.com/niger-reopens-mosques-churches/>); **AGENCE FRANCE**, *Locked-down Niger Braces for Violence as Ramadan Approaches*, 23 April 2020 (<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1263489/locked-down-niger-braces-for-violence-as-ramadan-approaches>).



The events surrounding the closures of places of worship in the sub-Saharan Africa region leave us with three important lessons on religious freedom. First, emergency restrictions on religious freedom in cases of a true emergency are unlikely to permanently impact religious freedom. While there is always a possibility that a government which is seeking an excuse to restrict religion can use such an event to enact such a policy on a permanent basis, that this did not occur in any of the 49 countries examined here indicates that this is a rare occurrence.

Second, restrictions were largely enforced equally across religious majorities and minorities in these countries, despite discrimination against religious minorities being present in many countries in the region⁴⁸. This indicates that in general the motivation for the closures and restrictions were clearly related to the pandemic and not other agendas.

Third, any restrictions on religious freedom are likely to produce resistance⁴⁹. This occurred in over three-quarters of countries which enacted some form of restriction on places of worship or religious gatherings. There is some evidence that in some cases governments which actively consult with religious leaders on emergency restrictions can limit or even prevent such resistance. This is likely precisely because it always fears that the restrictions are based in nefarious motivations, are intended for the public good in an emergency situation and are unlikely to be permanent. On the other hand, treating religious gatherings more strictly than other types of gatherings increases the likelihood of resistance.

Fourth, the above findings seem to be independent of religious tradition. The patterns of behavior by both governments and religious organizations were not very different between Christian-majority and Muslim-majority countries.

⁴⁸ J. FOX, *Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me: Why Governments Discriminate against Religious Minorities*, New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 2020; J. FOX, *The Unfree Exercise of Religion: A World Survey of Religious Discrimination against Religious Minorities*, New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 2016; J. FOX, *What is Religious Freedom and Who Has It?* in *Social Compass*, Vol.68(3), 2021, pp.321-341.

⁴⁹ M. BASEDAU, J. FOX, A. ZELLMAN, *Religious Minorities at Risk*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2023.

