Religious beliefs and institutions are central to Senegalese society and culture, and their outward and visible manifestations are omnipresent. A 2010 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life study found that 98 percent of Senegalese surveyed said that religion is ‘very important’ in their daily lives. Contemporary roles of religious leaders and communities are intricately interwoven into society, the economy, and politics. Yet, they are changing, reshaped inter alia by urbanization, expanding education options, and international migration. Faith leaders and communities are currently active in many facets of development, with the potential to make greater contributions (see figure 1).

Senegal's constitution establishes the government's secular foundation. Although influenced by French secularism (laïcité), Senegalese secularism is quite distinctive. Senegal emphasizes freedom to practice one's religion, equality among faith traditions, and commitment to a plural society, contrasting with the French emphasis on the absence of religious involvement in government affairs (and vice versa).

Government and religious authorities interact in numerous, complex ways. Senegalese secularism allows quite active government involvement in some religious affairs; although Senegal does not currently have a ministry of religious affairs, the President and Prime Minister both have advisors on religious affairs. The government sends an official delegation to each of the various religious pilgrimages within Senegal's borders, politicians solicit the favor of religious leaders to bolster support, and Senegalese presidents commonly seek audiences with prominent religious leaders. Alongside secularism, Senegalese politics in practice bears significant religious imprints that are not always perceived as neutral. Religious influence may be subtle, but it is felt.

**Figure 1. Trust in Religious Leaders**

Source: Afrobarometer Data, Senegal, Round 6, 2015. Available at: http://afrobarometer.org/data/329

---

**HIGHLIGHTS**

Religious communities and institutions have wide influence in Senegal, playing complex and dynamic roles in many sectors, notably education, agricultural production, and family health. There are, however, significant gaps in the recent dialogue and research about how religious communities shape the contemporary national development agenda, including its implementation. This brief draws from the report *Faith and Development in Focus: Senegal* to provide an overview of Senegal's religious communities, with a focus on development related activities.
RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE
At first glance, Senegal’s population is religiously quite homogenous (94 percent Muslim, with long-standing religious minorities, notably Christians—4 percent). Followers of traditional African religions make up the remaining 2 percent, although measurement is challenging because of overlap with other traditions. Many traditional beliefs still exist among Senegal’s Muslims and Christians (see figure 3). Religious adherence overlays the diverse ethnic communities of Senegal, which have distinct cultural features (see box).

Senegal is renowned for its commitment to interfaith peace and dialogue, and the government has long promoted interreligious harmony. Both Islamic and Christian holidays are officially recognized, and the government hosts various interfaith events. Senegalese Muslims and Christians take time off during each other’s holidays, and it is common for Muslims to invite Christian friends and neighbors to their houses to celebrate and vice versa. Interreligious marriages occur, events promoting interfaith relations are common, and some families count an imam and a priest among their ranks. Interreligious relations are largely positive, but there are areas for increased understanding (see Figure 2). There have been isolated incidents of religious intolerance in recent years, however, such as the vandalism of Christian statues and graveyards.

SENEGALESE ISLAM
Islam came to Senegal as early as the eleventh century, introduced largely through trade relationships with North African merchants. It did not spread widely, however, until several centuries later, with the rise of the Qadiriyya Sufi order (known locally as a confrérie) around the fifteenth century. Other confréries—the Tijaniyya, Muridiyya, and Layenes—followed in the nineteenth century. These Islamic roots influence Senegal’s social, political, and economic landscape, namely agricultural practices, education demand, and small commerce.

Most Senegalese Muslims affiliate with one of four confréries or orders. Senegalese Sufism was influenced by ETHNICITY IN SENEGAL
More than 20 ethnic groups are represented in Senegal, with diverse languages and cultural traditions. The predominant ethnic groups include the Wolof (43 percent), Pulaar (24), Sereer (15), Diola (5), and Mandinka (4). Interethnic relations are strong, with lighthearted jokes signifying familiarity and friendship between groups. In general, Wolofs and Pulaars tend to be Muslim, and Christians tend to be found more among the Sereer and Diola groups.

Figure 2. Interreligious Views among Senegalese Muslims

Figure 3. Traditional Beliefs among Senegalese Muslims
North African Islam but also by local leaders and traditions. Sufism, both broadly and in Senegal, emphasizes inward reflection and “God’s mercy, gentleness, and beauty more than wrath, severity, and majesty...”

Senegalese Sufism emphasizes the relationship between the religious leader (marabout) and the disciple (talibé), often described as a reciprocal relationship of voluntary submission (by the talibé) and spiritual surrender. Historically, this relationship often played out in an agricultural context: talibés worked in the fields of their marabouts and in return, gained job skills and received other assistance from the marabout. Contemporary relationships take various forms in urban and rural settings, but a common feature is trust and respect for the religious leaders.

The four Sufi confréries are the central feature of the country’s religious landscape (see box). Among Sufi communities, the Tijaniyya and Muridiyya have the largest numbers of adherents (see figure 4). Leaders of all of the confréries, however, are influential; certain leaders are said to have the power to make or break a political candidate’s campaign or to mobilize followers to promote various agendas (see figure 5). The confréries also influence their communities through their significant media presence, both traditional and new forms, addressing social, political, and religious questions.

Religious leadership is decentralized; each of Senegal’s confréries has its own hierarchical structure. Each confrérie is typically led by a Khalife Général (General Khalifa), who serves as the leader of all Senegalese branches of the confrérie (many confréries extend well beyond Senegal). Khalifes (Khalifas) serve as spiritual leaders of the branches within a Sufi order. Succession is hereditary. Most imams are affiliated with one of the confréries, but some are independent. Although no fixed qualifications are required, most imams have completed extensive Islamic studies and are chosen by communities for their Islamic knowledge, as well as their reputation and demeanor. Many mosques are

---

**CONFRÉRIES IN SENEGAL**

The four main confréries in Senegal have similar but distinctive features in terms of leadership, practice, and emphasis.

**Qadiriyya**

One of the smaller confréries in Senegal, the Qadiriyya community traces its presence in Senegal back to the fifteenth century CE, and “[t]o the extent that these Muslims had a Sufi affiliation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, it was Qadiriyya.” The Kounta family (based in Ndiassane) is the main religious family of the Qadiriyya in Senegal. The Qadiriyya’s principal activities have been agriculture and commerce.

**Tijaniyya**

The Tijaniyya confrérie has wide influence throughout West Africa and particularly strong links to Morocco. It took hold in Senegal during the nineteenth century, and El Hadj Omar Tall spread the Tidiane doctrine, at times through aggressive or militaristic means (his aspiration was to make West Africa an Islamic state). Among various active branches in Senegal are notably the Niassène family of Kaolack, the Omarien community, and the Sy family of Tivaouane.

**Muridiyya**

The Muridiyya is not the largest order in Senegal, but its influence on social, economic, and political development is strong. Mourides have long been active in agriculture, particularly in groundnut farming. The city of Touba (Senegal’s second largest agglomeration) is the center of the Muridiyya, and its special legal status allows autonomous administration. The Muridiyya was founded by Sheikh Amadou Bamba Mbacké in the late nineteenth century, and his intellectual leadership and life story (that included exile by the French) are influential to this day.

**Layenes**

The Layene confrérie dates to 1883, when Layenes say the Mahdi revealed himself in Senegal. Although the Mahdi, Limamou Laye, was a pacifist, he attracted negative attention from colonial authorities due to his many followers; he was briefly imprisoned. Non-discrimination and equality are core elements of Layene beliefs, as demonstrated by referring to one another as “Laye” instead of using family names in order to eliminate discrimination (these names can be linked to the traditional caste system). The Layenes are based in Yoff, an area of Dakar.
specific to a certain confrérie, but it is not uncommon for a follower of one confrérie to attend the mosque of another order. Unlike various countries in the region, Senegal does not have a central institution that manages religious affairs. Reliable data on the number of mosques, religious schools, imams, etc. is quite limited.

Muslim leaders and communities engage actively in Senegalese public policy debates on four key topics: public education and management of the parallel Islamic schools; the family code; gender roles; and agricultural production and land tenure. Long-standing debates regarding educational reform focus largely on adapting curricula to Senegalese realities—including language, religious instruction, and treatment of students in the Qur’anic schools (dairas). Family code law is contentious, notably around issues of marriage (age of marriage, spousal rights in divorce, etc.). And while Senegal stands out among Muslim-majority countries for progress in girls’ education and women’s political leadership, there is some backlash around some areas of women’s rights—notably from some religious leaders. The confréries historically played central roles in agricultural production and continue to do so; however, limited reliable information on land holdings and production methods has created challenges in the sector.

Sufi Community Groups
Religious community groups known as dairas are an important feature of Senegalese Islam—and specifically the confréries—and are proven avenues to engage with local development needs. The dairas offer social support and seek to meet members’ spiritual needs; many dairas are specific to men, women, or youths. They serve various concrete roles, for example planning religious gatherings—with women often undertaking logistical support, such as cooking—and providing material support to members in times of need (births, deaths, etc.). Many dairas engage actively in social issues and can quickly mobilize members. Some dairas educate members on proper health and sanitation measures before religious pilgrimages; others provide information to members on universal health coverage. Many perform charitable work, including organizing free medical consultations, collecting donations for prisoners, and doing environmental cleanups.

Other Muslim Communities
The confréries dominate the religious landscape as long time mainstays of Senegalese society, but there is a notable diversification of Senegalese Islam. The confréries are undergoing significant change, including in the forms of social and political influence they exert. Different forms of Islam began to arise in the mid-twentieth century and are expanding, albeit quite slowly. Various Sunni reformist and Shi’a communities have emerged, with different historical trajectories and belief systems. Changing global communications and patterns of migration influence this diversification, as well as the appeal of new ways of practicing Islam, for example to escape the ideological monopoly of the confréries.

The Sunni reformist movement is sometimes described as a search for a ‘more authentic’ practice of Islam.7 From

---

**Figure 4. Confrérie Affiliation among Senegalese Sufis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confrérie</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tijaniyya</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muridiyya</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qadiriyya</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layene</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the 1930s, Senegalese who viewed the hierarchical *confrérie* structure as a barrier between a believer and God broke away from the traditional structures. *Al Falah* and *Jama’atou Ibadou Rahmane*, two Sunni reformist organizations, promote this ideology in the media and through extensive community programs. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey are significant influences, especially with new media and growing connectivity, and provide material, intellectual, and spiritual support. Distinct from Sufi women in Senegal, female members of the Sunni community typically wear the hijab—often called *ibadou* in Senegal after *Jama’atou Ibadou Rahmane*—as a visible demonstration of their piety and unique Sunni identity.

A small Senegalese Shī’a community developed as an intellectual movement around the time of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when some Senegalese (especially young people) began to question the dominance of Sufism in society. The Iranian embassy promoted Shī’a Islam in Senegal (occasionally sparking some tensions with Senegal’s government). Senegalese Shī’a leaders maintain close relations with Iran today. The Shī’a community works deliberately to increase its numbers and is quite active in the media.

**SENEGAL’S CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES**

Christians represent a small minority, but Christianity has played influential roles in Senegalese history. Most Senegalese Christians are Catholics, but Protestants are also present and active. The long-standing and integrated Christian presence contributes to Senegal’s traditions of interreligious harmony.

**RELIGION IN THE DIASPORA**

Diaspora communities of Senegalese commonly maintain strong links with Senegalese religious communities. *Dahiras* in the diaspora serve as an important support system. As in Senegal, *dahiras* in the diaspora provide opportunities for spiritual growth and social support, also taking on new roles that reflect the complexities of diaspora life. *Dahiras* help on legal matters and offer advice and support on matters ranging from employment to housing. Christian groups among Senegalese migrants, such as the Senegalese Catholic Association of America, also play important roles.

Diaspora groups make it a priority to give back to their communities in Senegal. With an estimated 11 percent of Senegal’s GDP coming from remittances, diaspora communities can wield significant economic and political influence. Many Senegalese in the diaspora give generously to their religious communities to support development projects, such as the construction of schools, mosques, hospitals, and water systems in Senegal. The Mourides are particularly known for financial gifts for infrastructure and development projects in the holy city of Touba.

Portuguese explorers introduced Christianity to Senegal in the fifteenth century, but it was only during French colonization (from the late seventeenth century) that Catholicism took root. Catholicism was the main faith of the French colonists, and missionary efforts expanded in the 1800s, though conversion proceeded slowly. The Catholic presence included Catholic schools, health care services, and training Catholic educators. Catholics used local languages in evangelization efforts. Three Senegalese priests were ordained in 1848, and in 1962, Monseigneur Hyacinthe Thiandoum became the first Senegalese Archbishop of Dakar.

Among Senegal’s more active Protestant communities is the Lutheran Church of Senegal. Founded by the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission in 1974, it maintains close relationships with the international Lutheran community and institutions. There are an estimated 6,000 Lutherans in Senegal, many near the Church’s headquarters in Fatick.

---

**Figure 5. Influence of *Confréries***

![Graph showing the influence of *Confréries*](image)

Source: Afrobarometer Data, Senegal, Round 6, 2015. Available at: http://afrobarometer.org/data/529

---
Senegalese leadership is clearly established, with several pastors ordained in recent years. The United Methodist Church of Senegal has a strong foreign missionary presence, but aims to achieve local ownership. Other Protestant communities (Baptist, Assembly of God, etc.) are also present. Evangelizing activities are accepted, but have sparked tensions in some regions.

RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT AGENDAS

Widely varied faith-inspired organizations (FIOs) and institutions are involved in many facets of Senegal’s social and economic development. They range from large international NGOs to small community-based organizations; they work on diverse topics, such as child protection, education, agriculture, and health care. Some are active within Senegal’s dynamic and relatively free civil society, while others perceive their institutions as quite separate from a civil society they view as secular. There is no registry of institutions with faith ties or that are primarily faith-inspired. For a fuller discussion and more detailed examples, see Faith and Development in Focus: Senegal.

Collaboration with religious leaders has been a valuable strategy for various non-religious development organizations in Senegal. Tostan is a notable example; this Senegal-based international NGO has long engaged religious leaders in its community development projects. Tostan has an imam on staff who advises on religious aspects of Tostan’s programs which include sensitive topics, such as Female Genital Cutting (FGC) and women’s rights.

Islamic development engagement

• With the Muslim emphasis on education, and especially religious education, communities are most actively involved in education.

• Local communities respond pragmatically to community needs with projects and approaches shaped by Islamic values and teachings (for example, in following Muslim teachings on credit and Muslim charitable priorities).

• Confrérie-affiliated structures rely heavily on followers, both in Senegal and abroad, to support and fund development activities addressing numerous needs. The Qadiriyya provides job training to youth and offers skills training to women; the Mourides construct mosques, Islamic schools, and health clinics; and the Layenes focus on Islamic schools and libraries. Within the Tijaniyya the Niassène family has built a solid reputation as an education provider, the Sy family of Tivaouane works to promote peace among Senegal’s religious communities, and the Omarien community has organized free health screenings and conferences on poverty reduction.

• Various development partners (public and private) working in Senegal collaborate with confrérie networks. The government has made concerted efforts to engage confrérie leaders in development programs and initiatives across several sectors, including child protection, education, health care, and, recently, family planning.

• Muslim FIOs of various sizes and traditions support development programs. For example, Secours Islamique France (SIF, Islamic Relief France) is especially active in child protection in Senegal. The Association

Figure 6. Percentage of Christians in Senegal’s Regions

Source: Afrobarometer Data, Senegal, Round 6, 2015. Available at: http://afrobarometer.org/data/329. Based on a survey of 1,200 Senegalese.
mondiale de l’appel islamique (World Islamic Call Society) is also present, as are Mozadahir International and the Association Ali Yacine, two Shi’a organizations working on topics ranging from health care to environmental protection. Al Falah and Jamaatou Ibadou Rahmani, two Senegalese Sunni reformist structures, have several community development projects that focus broadly on education and schools, with programs and groups for children and youth.

**Christian development engagement**

- The small Christian community in Senegal is quite active on a range of socio-economic development topics. Organizations range from local FIOs (often linked to specific denominations) to large, transnational Christian organizations, like World Vision and Catholic Relief Services.

- Catholics have a long history of social and charitable works in Senegal with many missionary-established schools and health centers. Catholic actors continue that tradition and are respected for their contributions to the private education sector (the majority of students in Senegal’s Catholic schools are Muslim).

- The Catholic Church of Senegal is engaged in diverse development projects, notably through the Direction des Œuvres catholiques, or Catholic Works Division, that focuses on charitable projects. Examples include health education for girls, literacy training for rural women, microfinance, and support for prisoners.

- Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Caritas partner with the local Catholic Church. In addition, CRS has worked for peaceful solutions to the conflict in the Casamance. Caritas focuses on education quality and ensuring educational opportunities for children from Senegal’s poorest families.

- Protestant communities in Senegal draw on a long tradition of Protestant service. Several departments of the Lutheran Church of Senegal organize diverse charitable activities, for example health clinics, a food security program, and literacy training in local languages. The United Methodist Church of Senegal operates an agriculture program, skills training sessions for women, and a children’s nutrition project. World Vision focuses largely on child protection, with projects on nutrition, birth registration, and ending child marriage.

**HOW FAR DO EXTREMIST AND FUNDAMENTALIST RELIGIOUS VIEWS AFFECT SENEGAL?**

Despite growing security challenges in West Africa, Senegal has been spared the various types of violent incidents that have plagued several of its neighbors. However, the Senegalese government has publicly acknowledged the existence of dormant terrorist cells within its borders. Senegal has played a key role in regional anti-terror initiatives. It signed a new defense cooperation deal with the United States in May 2016.

The Senegalese government has visibly increased efforts to combat new and existing security threats. There have been high profile arrests, such as the 2015 arrest of several dozen imams and preachers accused of inciting or supporting terrorism; expanded security presence throughout the country; and greater government monitoring of funding sources for schools and mosques. Local Islamic organizations have reported refusing funding offers from foreign sources that came with conditions seen as discordant with Senegalese religious traditions.

There is heightened awareness among Senegalese about security threats in the region. A 2014 Pew study found that 46 percent of Senegalese were concerned about Islamic extremism in their country. Religious leaders have expressed concern that the country’s large youth population, especially with high unemployment rates, could be particularly vulnerable to extremist propaganda.

Senegalese observers note a marked increase in fundamentalism that they link, above all, to the growing influence of social media. Scholar Abdoul Aziz Kébé contends that Senegalese Islam itself is not moving toward fundamentalism, though existing fundamentalism is apparent in changes in dress and growing numbers of young people joining fundamentalist organizations. Several recent conferences in Senegal have focused on religious fundamentalism and extremism.
ENDNOTES


8. Sufi women typically do not cover at all or wear a headscarf that covers the hair only (except when they enter a mosque).


The primary author for this brief is Lauren Herzog, WFDD program coordinator, with oversight and direction from Katherine Marshall. It is part of a larger country-mapping project conducted jointly by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University and the World Faiths Development Dialogue with funding from the Henry R. Luce Initiative on Religion and International Affairs. Full country-specific reports and interviews can be found online at http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/subprojects/country-mapping-senegal.

THE WORLD FAITHS DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE (WFDD) is a not-for-profit organization working at the intersection of religion and global development. Housed within the Berkley Center in Washington, D.C., WFDD documents the work of faith inspired organizations and explores the importance of religious ideas and actors in development contexts. WFDD supports dialogue between religious and development communities and promotes innovative partnerships, at national and international levels, with the goal of contributing to positive and inclusive development outcomes.

THE BERKLEY CENTER FOR RELIGION, PEACE, AND WORLD AFFAIRS at Georgetown University, created within the Office of the President in 2006, is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of religion, ethics, and public life. Through research, teaching, and service, the center explores global challenges of democracy and human rights; economic and social development; international diplomacy; and interreligious understanding. Two premises guide the center’s work: that a deep examination of faith and values is critical to address these challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.