

Afrobarometer  
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## News release

### Freedom slipping? Africa's closing political space marked by less freedom and a willingness to trade liberties for security

Africans see their individual freedoms diminishing, and many are willing to give up at least some liberties in the name of security, new Afrobarometer survey findings indicate.

The fifth of Afrobarometer's Pan-Africa Profiles, based on recent public-opinion surveys in 34 countries, reports that in most African countries, citizens' assessments of how free they are, and of how cautious they must be in exercising their rights, have worsened considerably over the past decade. In addition, popular demand for freedom of association has weakened, and Africans express a widespread willingness to trade some freedoms for increased security.



The new report, available at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org), traces continental trends toward both greater government constraints on freedom and greater public tolerance for such constraints, perhaps fueled in part by fears of insecurity, instability, and/or extremist violence.

#### Key findings

##### On support (or demand) for individual freedoms:

- Support for the fundamental freedom of association remains strong, at 62% across 34 countries.
- Nonetheless, support for freedom of association has shown modest but steady declines: Across 20 countries measured over the past decade, support has dropped 5 percentage points, from 66% to 61% (Figure 1).
- Over the past seven to 10 years, only six countries report significant increases in support for the right to associate freely, compared to 20 countries that have shown substantial declines, led by Zimbabwe (-23 percentage points). Support has decreased even in several of the continent's leading democracies, including Tunisia (-20 points), Namibia (-18), Ghana (-9), Benin (-7), and South Africa (-7) (Figure 2).

##### On willingness to trade freedom for security:

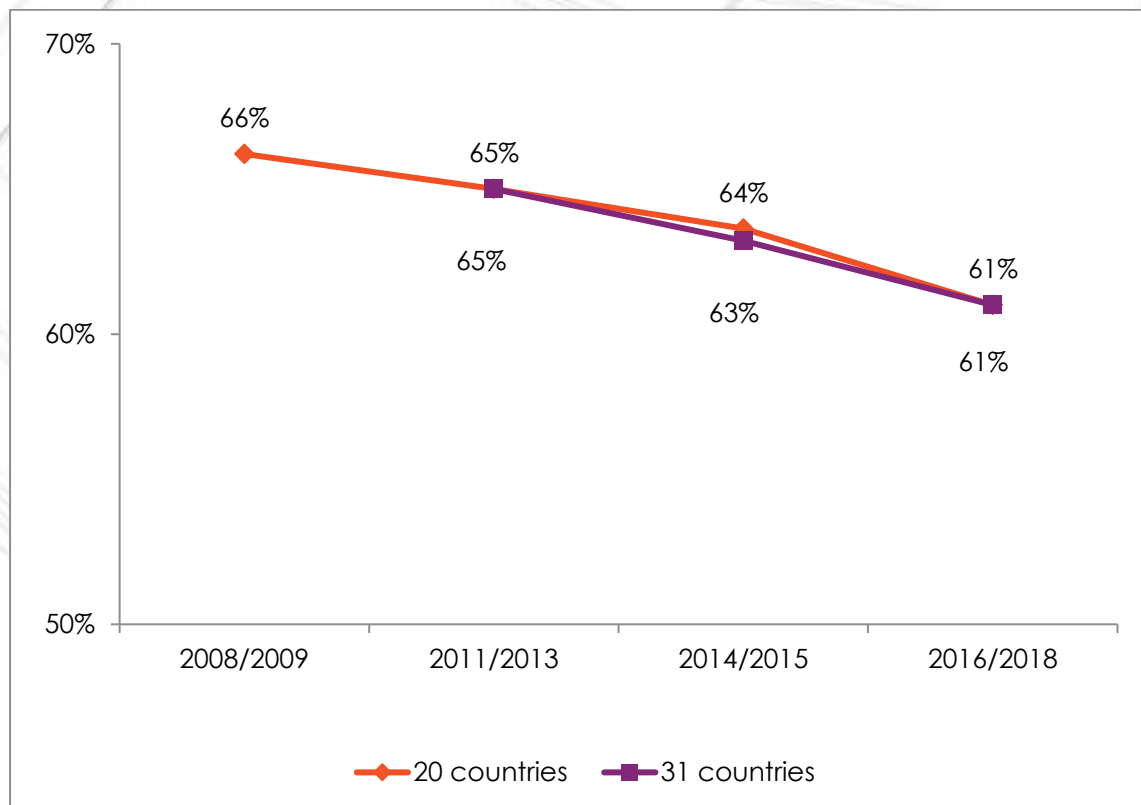
- While a slim majority (53%) stand for the right to private communications, 43% are instead willing to accept government monitoring in the interests of security.
- People are about evenly divided on freedom of religious speech, with 49% backing complete freedom and 47% willing to tolerate government limits on religious speech (Figure 3).
- Support for unrestricted freedom of movement is much lower, at just 35%, compared to 62% who are willing to countenance curfews, roadblocks, and other restrictions in the interests of greater security.

**On the extent of freedom of expression in general, and political speech in particular:**

- Two-thirds (67%) of Africans say they are “somewhat” or completely” free to say what they think, but this represents a 7-percentage-point decline across 31 countries tracked since 2011/2013. Nearly all countries record declines, many of them substantial (Figure 4).
- And when it comes to political speech, a similar two-thirds majority (68%) say that people must “often” or “always” be careful of what they say about politics; across 20 countries, this proportion has increased by 9 percentage points over the past decade.
- Similar proportions say that people must be careful about which organizations they join (63%) and about how they vote (68%).

**Charts**

**Figure 1: Support freedom to join any organization | 20 and 31 countries | 2008-2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies.

Statement 2: We should be able to join any organization whether or not the government approves of it.

(% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with Statement 2)

**Figure 2: Changes in support for freedom to join any organization (percentage points) | 33 countries | 2008-2018**

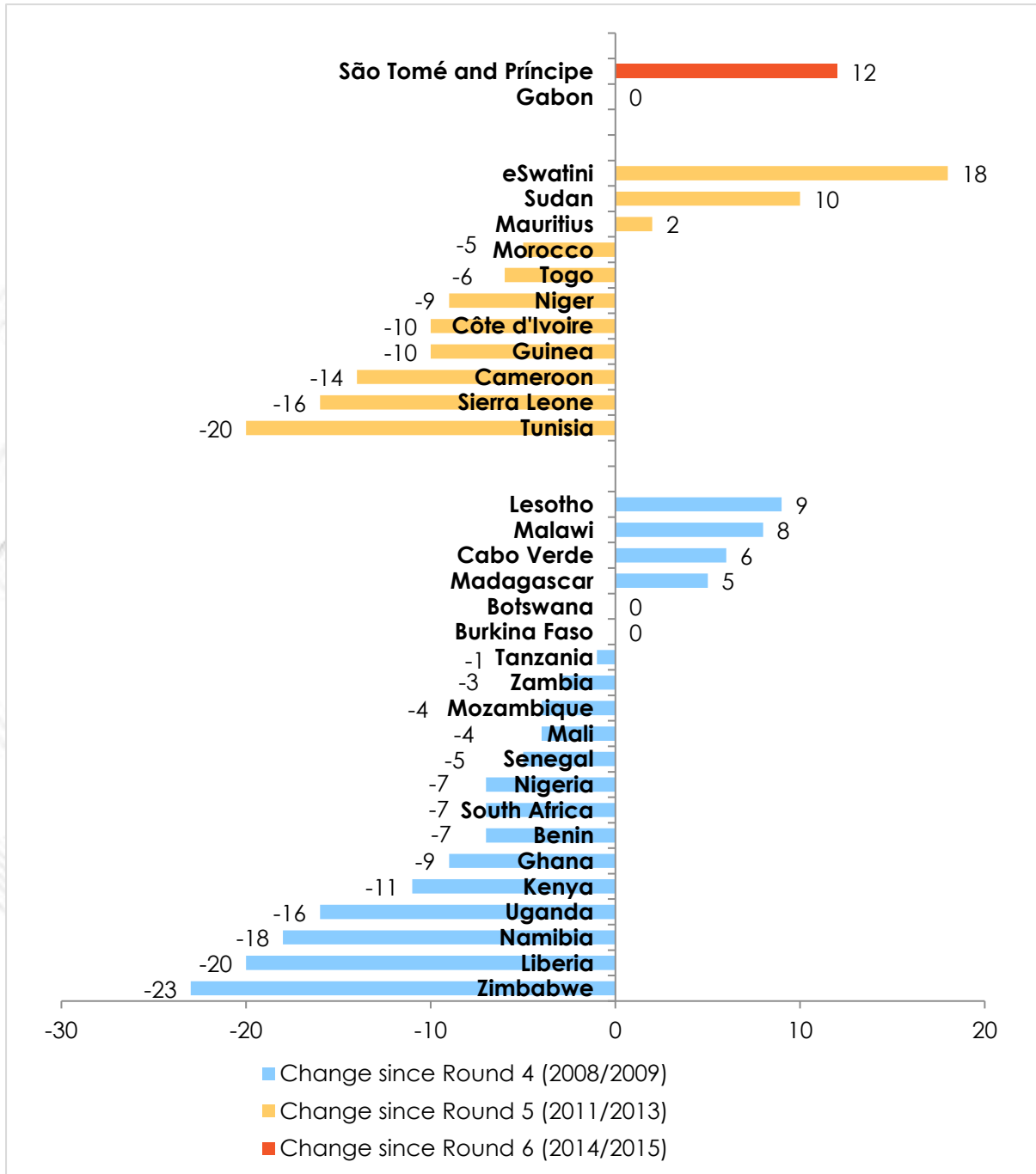
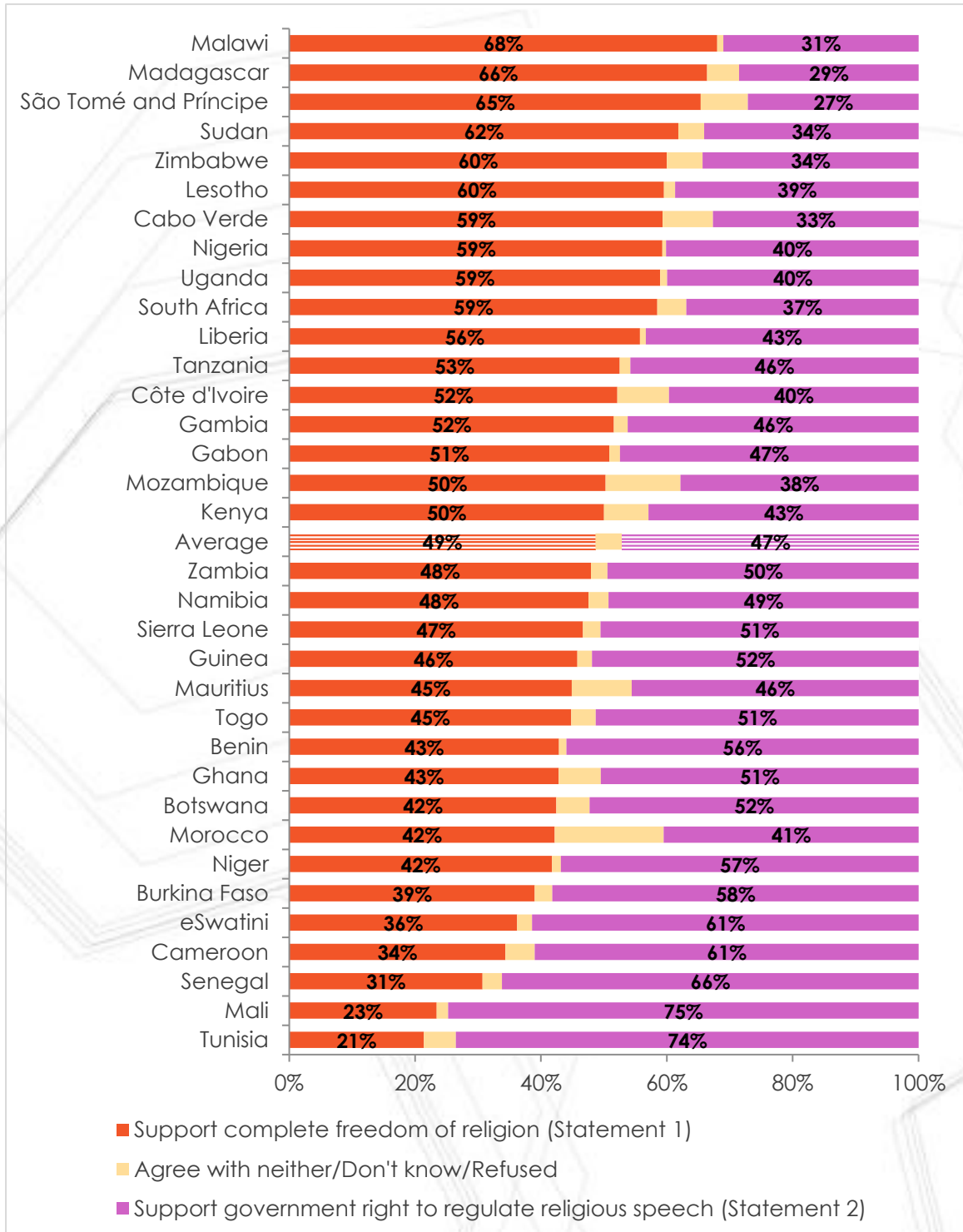


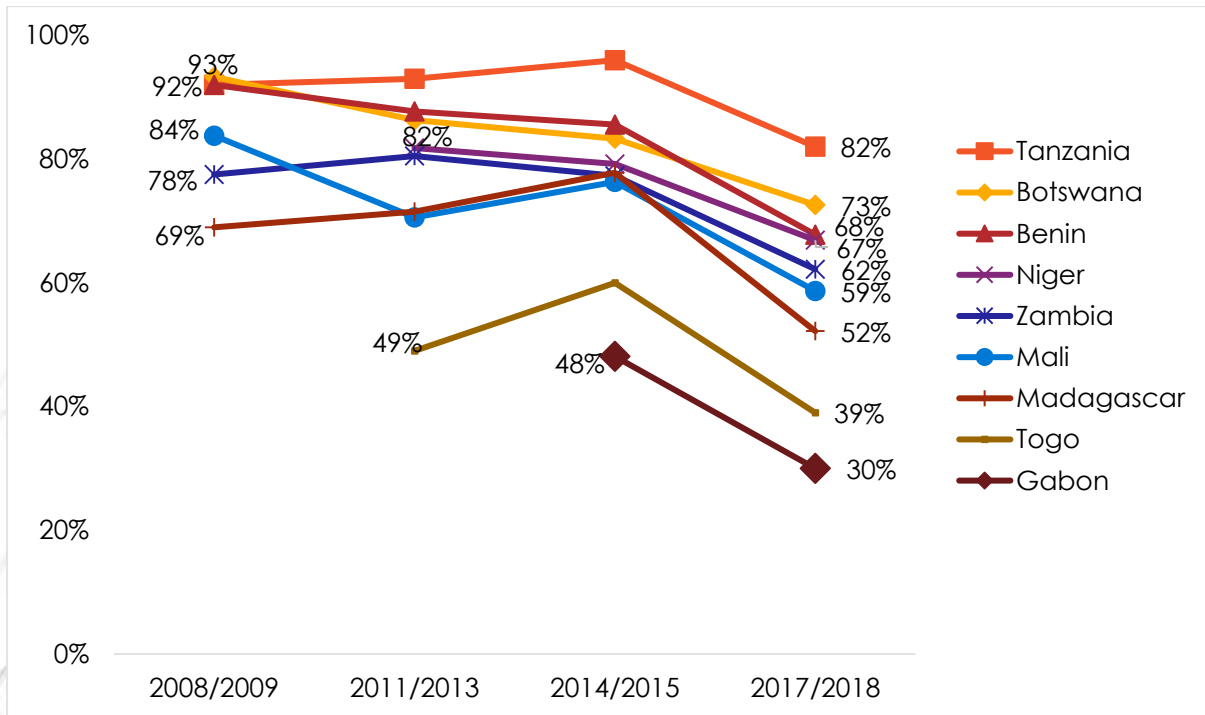
Figure shows change, in percentage points, since indicated survey round in % of respondents who “agree” or “agree very strongly” that people should be able to join any organization, whether or not the government approves of it. (\* The Gambia is not shown because it was first surveyed in 2018.)

**Figure 3 : Support for absolute freedom of religious worship vs. government right to regulate religious speech | 34 countries | 2016/2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: Freedom of religion and worship are absolute, meaning that government should never limit what is said in a place of worship.  
 Statement 2: Government should have the power to regulate what is said in places of worship, especially if preachers or congregants threaten public security.  
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

**Figure 4: Perceived freedom of expression over time | selected countries | 2008-2018**



**Respondents were asked:** *In this country, how free are you to say what you think? (% "completely free" or "somewhat free")*

### Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 survey findings in 34 countries are being released in 2018/2019. Interested readers may follow our releases, including our Pan-Africa Profiles series of cross-country analyses, at #VoicesAfrica and sign up for our distribution list at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org).

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples. Sample sizes of 1,200-2,400 yield country-level results with a margin of sampling error of +/-2 to 3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

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