

Religion in Africa: Tolerance and trust in leaders are high, but many would allow regulation of religious speech

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 339 | Brian Howard

Summary

Africans overwhelmingly identify with a religious faith, trust their religious leaders, and express tolerance of people of other faiths, a new Afrobarometer analysis shows. Nonetheless, in most countries a majority of Africans favour civil over religious law as the basis for government (though Niger, Morocco, and Sudan are exceptions). And nearly half say government should have the power to regulate religious speech in the name of public safety.



Findings from national surveys in 34 African countries show religious affiliation as well as tolerance for other religions are cross-cutting characteristics of African publics – majorities in all countries claim a religious affiliation and profess tolerance for those of other faiths.

Religious leaders are more trusted and less widely seen as corrupt than any other group of public leaders, although both of these positive perceptions have weakened somewhat since the previous survey round.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations of quality of life, governance, and democracy. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys are planned in at least 35 countries in 2019/2020. Interested readers may follow our releases, including our Pan-Africa Profiles series of Round 7 cross-country analyses, at #VoicesAfrica and sign up for our distribution list at www.afrobarometer.org.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This Pan-Africa Profile draws on data from 45,823 interviews completed in 34 countries between September 2016 and September 2018 (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates). The countries covered are home to almost 80% of the continent's population. The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country findings such as regional or Africa-wide averages, each country is weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

Key findings

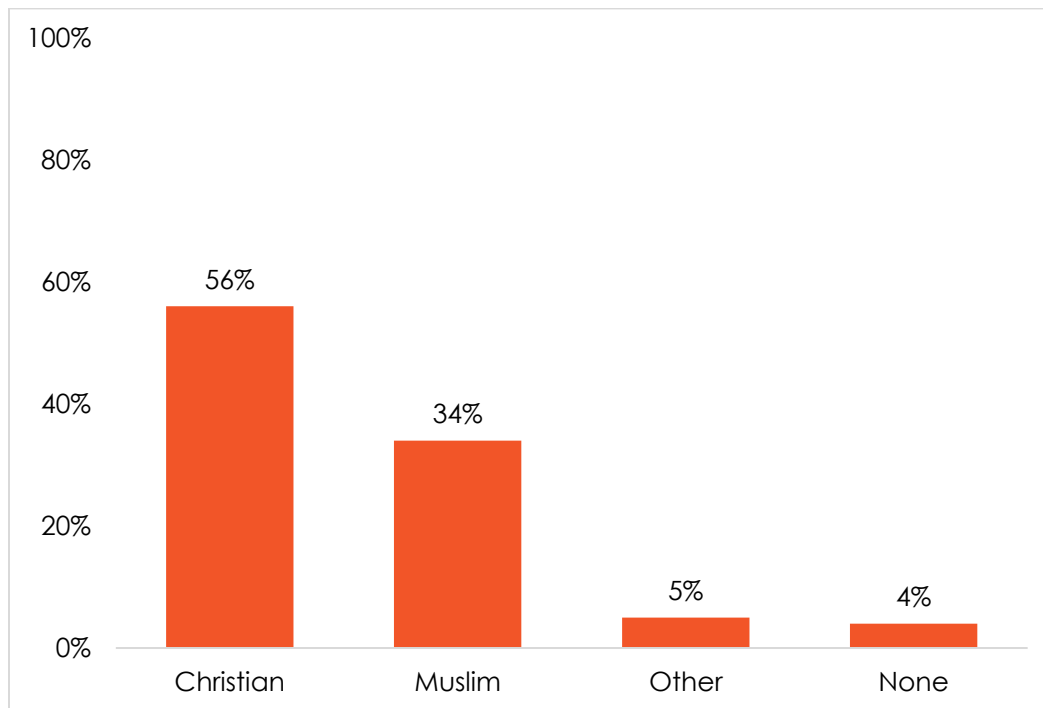
- More than nine in 10 Africans (95%) identify with a religion. A majority say they are Christians (56%), while one in three (34%) self-identify as Muslim, although of course these proportions vary widely by country (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Only 4% say they are atheists or agnostics or have no religion.
- On average across 34 countries, three in 10 Africans say they are leaders (6%) or active members (24%) of religious groups that meet outside of regular worship services. Liberians (58%), Kenyans (56%), and Zambians (55%) are most likely to say they are active in religious groups, while predominantly Muslim countries such as Tunisia (2%) and Morocco (2%) are least likely to report membership in religious groups outside of regular worship (Figure 3). Younger and urban respondents are slightly less active in such groups than older and rural citizens (Figure 4).
- More than four in 10 Africans (43%) say they contacted a religious leader at least once during the previous year, including 19% who say they did so “often.” Kenyans (71%), Ugandans (63%), and Zambians (58%) are most likely to report contact with a religious leader (Figure 5). Africans are more likely to contact religious leaders than other types of public officials, such as traditional leaders (31%), local government councillors (22%), or members of Parliament (11%) (Figure 6). More men than women report contact with a religious leader (46% vs. 39%), and contact increases with respondents’ age, ranging from 38% of 18- to 25-year-olds to 49% of those over age 65 (Figure 7).
- Religious leaders are more widely trusted and less widely seen as corrupt than any other group of public leaders. However, both of these positive perceptions have weakened somewhat since the previous survey round (Figure 8).
 - More than two-thirds (69%) of citizens say they trust religious leaders “somewhat” or “a lot,” compared to 52% who say the same about their president and 43% who trust their members of Parliament (Figure 9). Popular trust in religious leaders is highest in Senegal (91%) and Uganda (90%), but fewer than half of Tunisians (42%), Gabonese (42%), and South Africans (49%) say they trust religious leaders even “somewhat” (Figure 10). Popular trust in religious leaders increases with age (from 66% among 18- to 25-year-olds to 74% of those over age 65) and decreases with education level. Muslims (74%) are more likely than Christians (68%) to say they trust religious leaders (Figure 11).
 - About one in seven respondents (15%) say “most” or “all” religious leaders are corrupt – a far more positive assessment than that accorded other types of officials (Figure 12).
 - Still, a majority (57%) say at least “some” religious leaders are corrupt. Gabonese hold a particularly jaundiced view of religious leaders: Almost half (45%) say “most” or “all” are corrupt. Few Malagasy (5%) and Tanzanians (3%) agree (Figure 13).
- Most Africans express tolerant attitudes toward other religions. On average, almost nine out of 10 (87%) say they would “strongly like,” “somewhat like,” or “not care” if they lived next door to people of a different religion. Religious tolerance falls below two-thirds only in Niger (56%) and Sudan (65%) (Figure 14). Muslims (79%) are less likely to express tolerant attitudes than Christians (91%) and those identifying with other or no religions (91%).
- About one in 10 Africans (9%) say they experienced discrimination based on their religion during the previous year. Twice as many report experiencing such discrimination in

Nigeria (22%) and Liberia (21%) (Figure 15). Christians are almost twice as likely as Muslims to say they were discriminated against (11% vs. 6%).

- One in three Africans (32%) say their country should be governed primarily by religious law, while six in 10 (61%) prefer to be governed exclusively by civil law. Support for rule by religious law is particularly strong in Niger (70%), Morocco (68%), and Sudan (65%), while fewer than one in five citizens favour this option in Mauritius (6%), Zimbabwe (13%), Cabo Verde (15%), Côte d'Ivoire (17%), and Mozambique (19%) (Figure 16). On average, Muslim respondents (40%) are more likely to favour religious law than Christians (29%) and those who identify with other or no religions (23%).
- Africans are evenly divided on whether the government should have the right to limit religious freedom in the name of public safety. About half (49%) believe in absolute freedom of religion and would deny their government the power to regulate what is said in a place of worship, while about the same proportion (47%) say the government should be able to regulate religious speech, especially if it threatens public security. Some countries that have experienced extremist violence register below-average levels of support for freedom of religious speech, including Tunisia (21%), Mali (23%), Cameroon (34%), Burkina Faso (39%), and Niger (42%) (Figure 17).
- About one in 10 citizens in Nigeria (11%), Burkina Faso (10%), Niger (9%), and Cameroon (9%) say they personally experienced violence by political or religious extremists during the two years preceding the survey. Almost four times as many say they feared but didn't experience such violence in Burkina Faso (39%) and Mali (37%) (Figure 18).

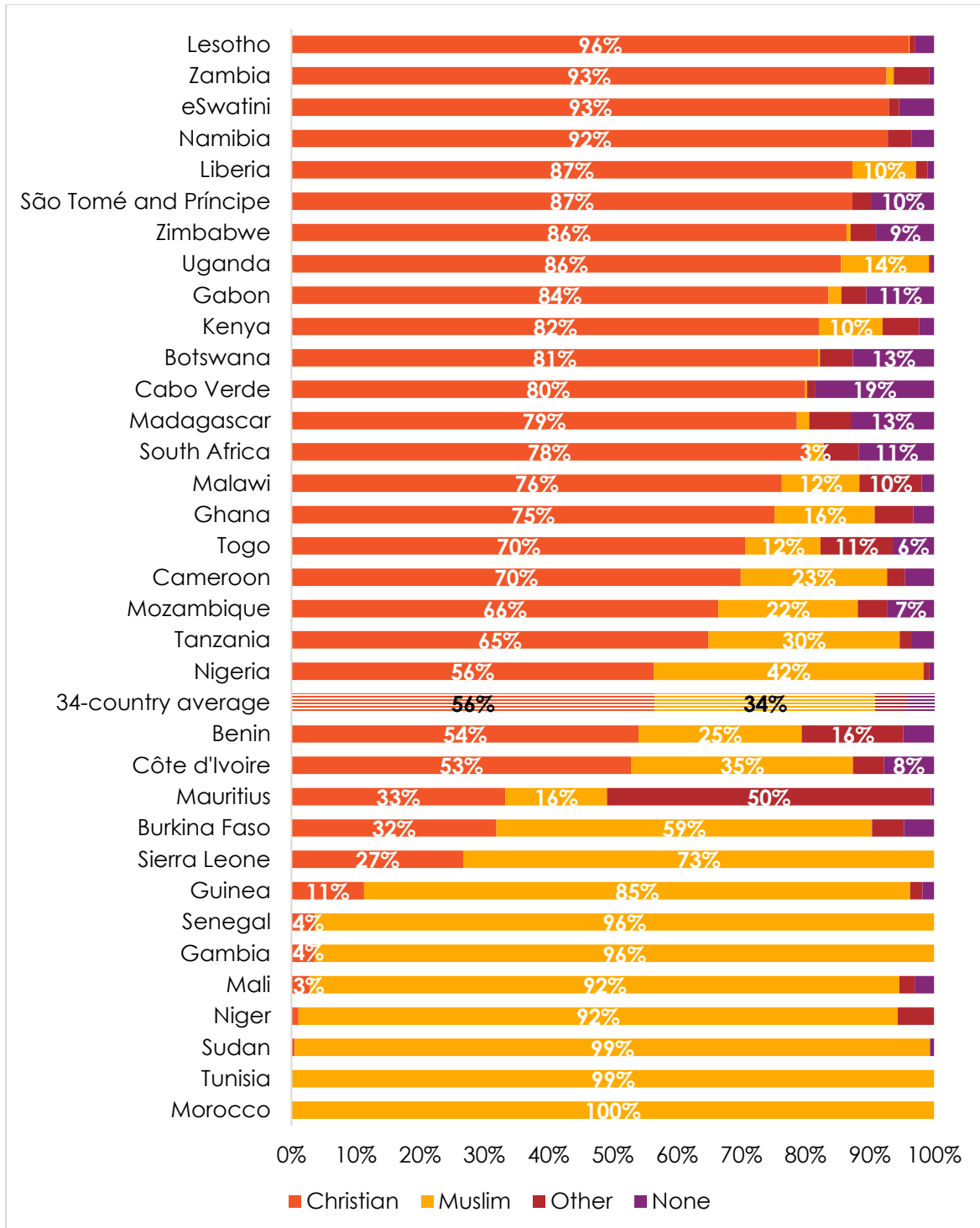
Charts

Figure 1: Religious affiliation | 34 countries | 2016/2018



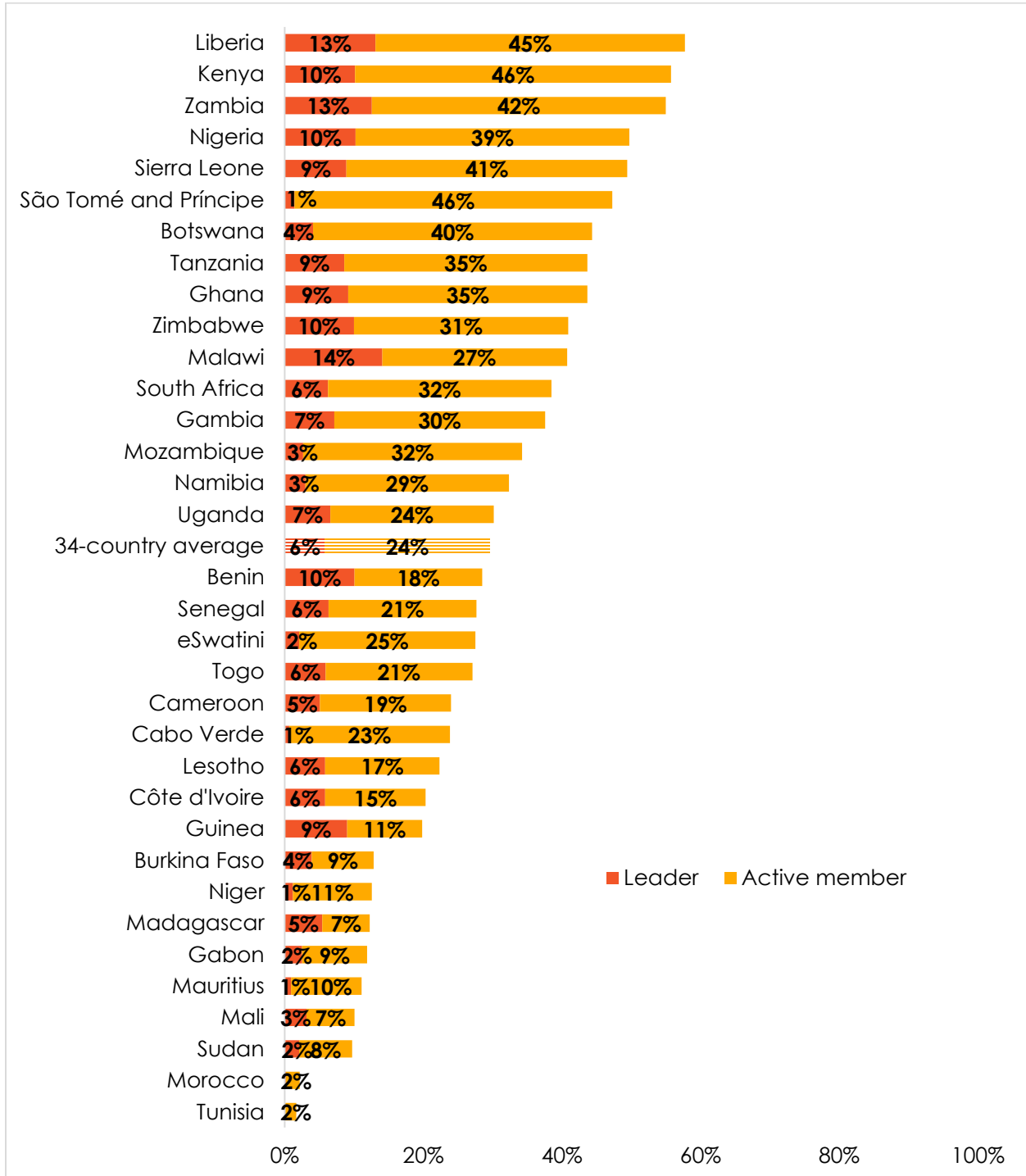
Respondents were asked: What is your religion, if any?

Figure 2: Religious affiliation | by country | 34 countries | 2016/2018



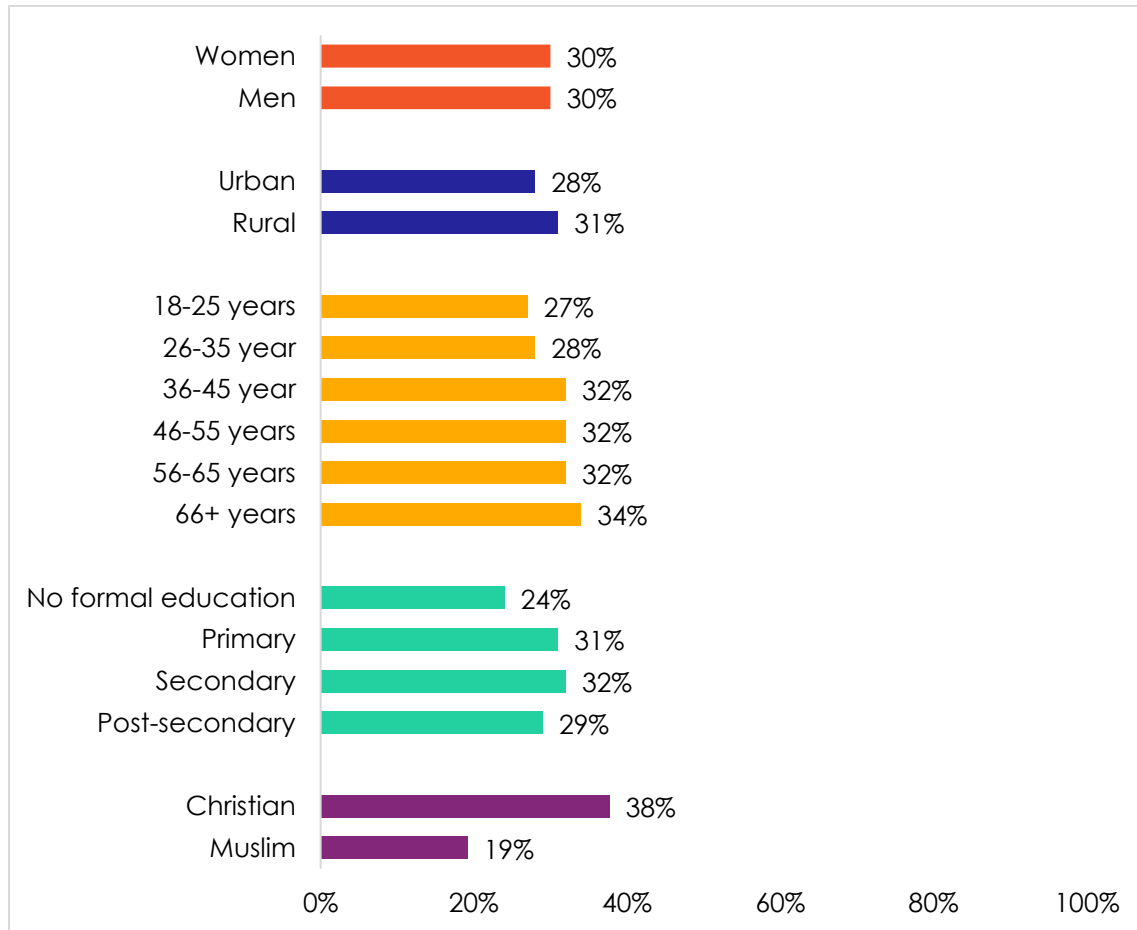
Respondents were asked: What is your religion, if any?

Figure 3: Participation in religious groups that meet outside of regular worship services
 | 34 countries | 2016/2018



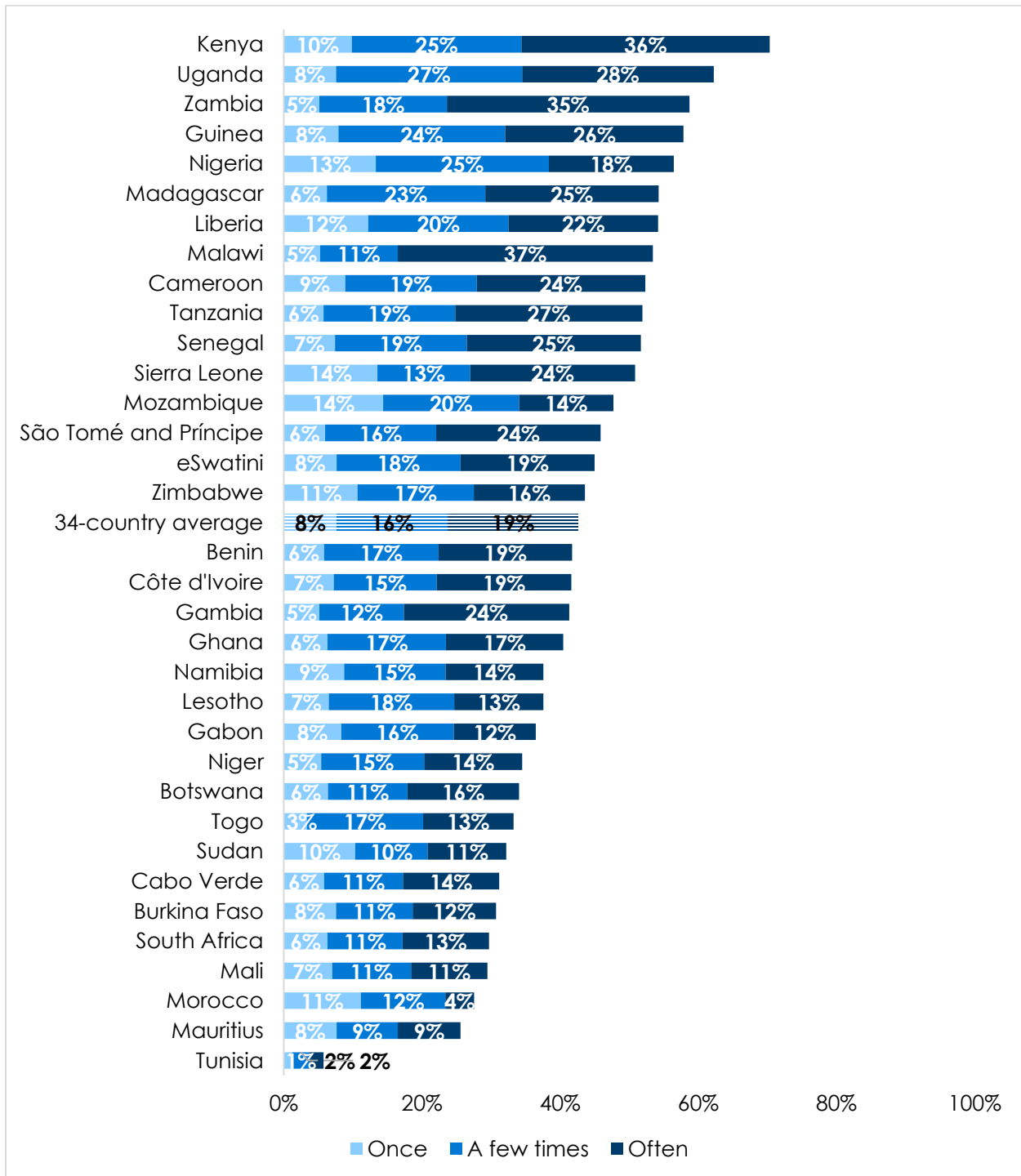
Respondents were asked: Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member: A religious group that meets outside of regular worship services?

Figure 4: Active membership or leadership in religious groups | by socio-demographic group | 34 countries | 2016/2018



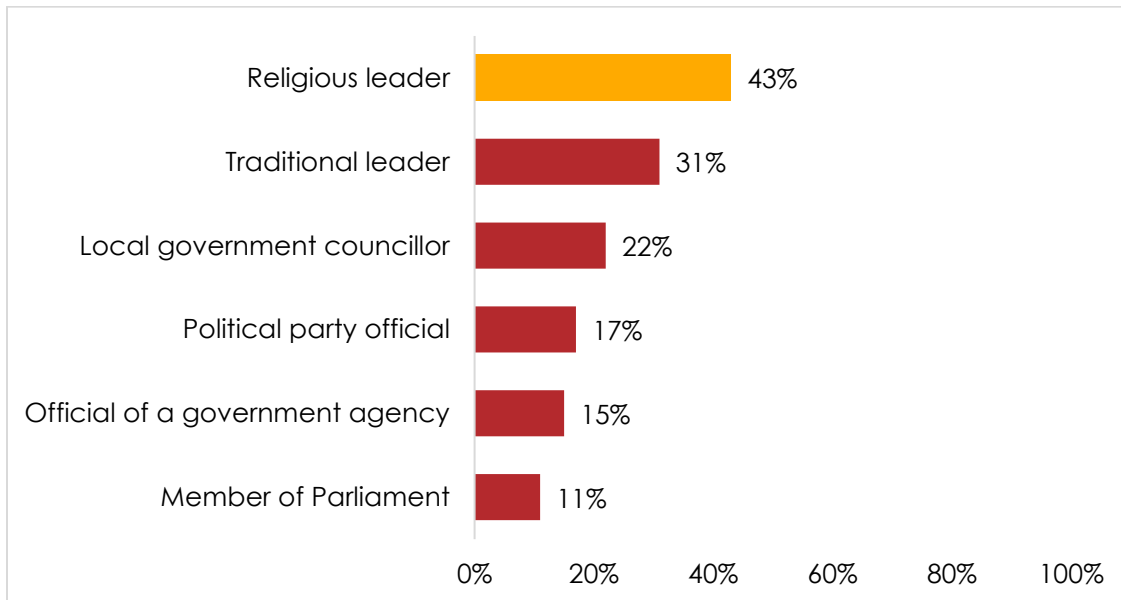
Respondents were asked: For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member: A religious group that meets outside of regular worship services? (% who say "active member" or "official leader")

Figure 5: Contact with religious leaders | 34 countries | 2016/2018



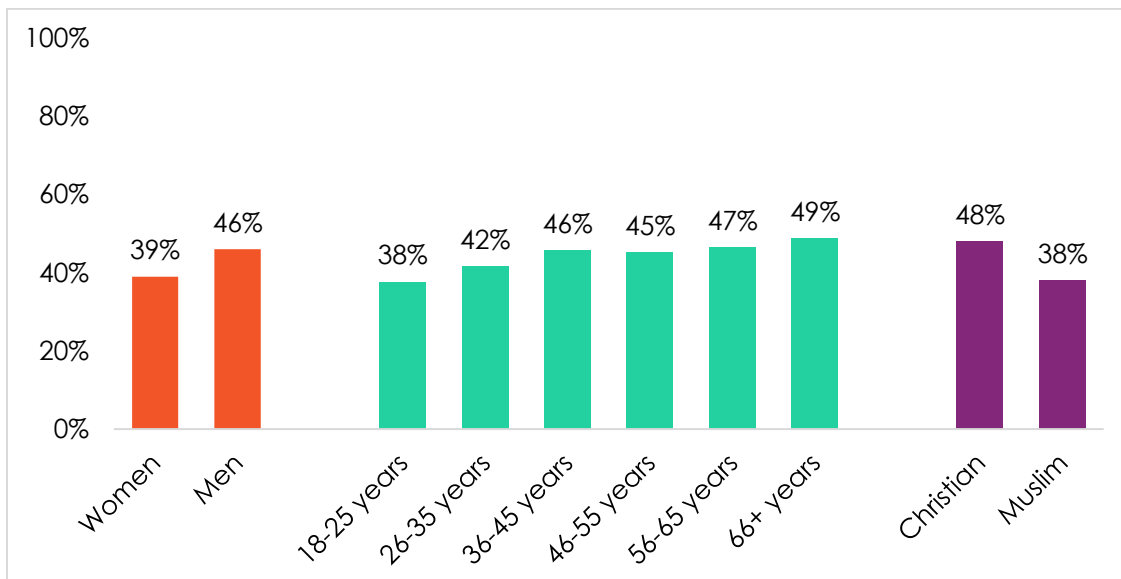
Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views: Religious leaders?

Figure 6: Contact with religious leaders vs. other officials | 34 countries | 2016/2018



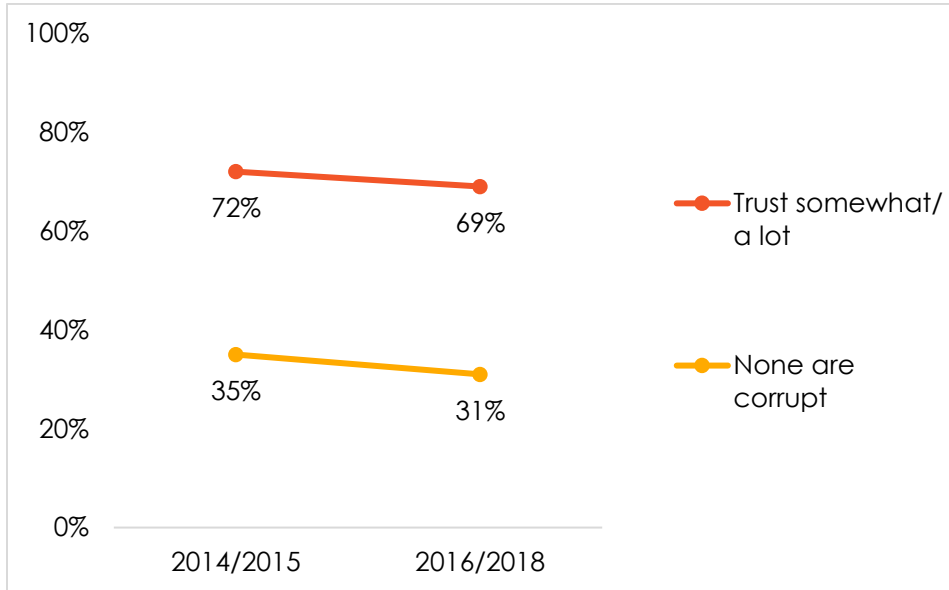
Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% who say “only once,” “a few times,” or “often”)

Figure 7: Contact with religious leaders | by gender, age, and religion | 34 countries | 2016/2018



Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views: Religious leaders? (% who say “only once,” “a few times,” or “often”)

Figure 8: Religious leaders: Popular trust and perceived corruption | 33 countries
 | 2014-2018

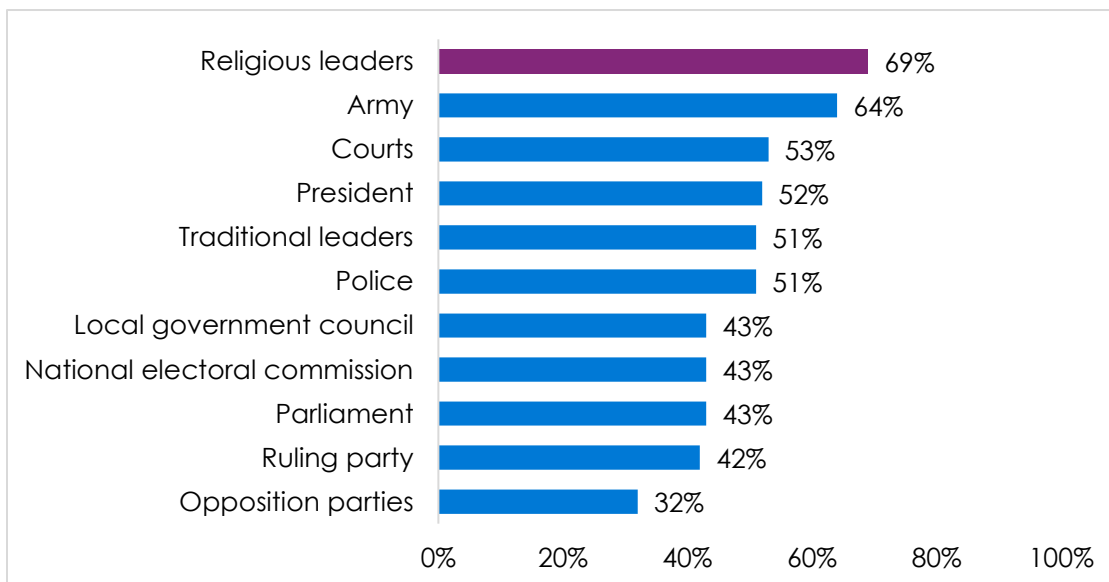


Respondents were asked:

How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Religious leaders? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

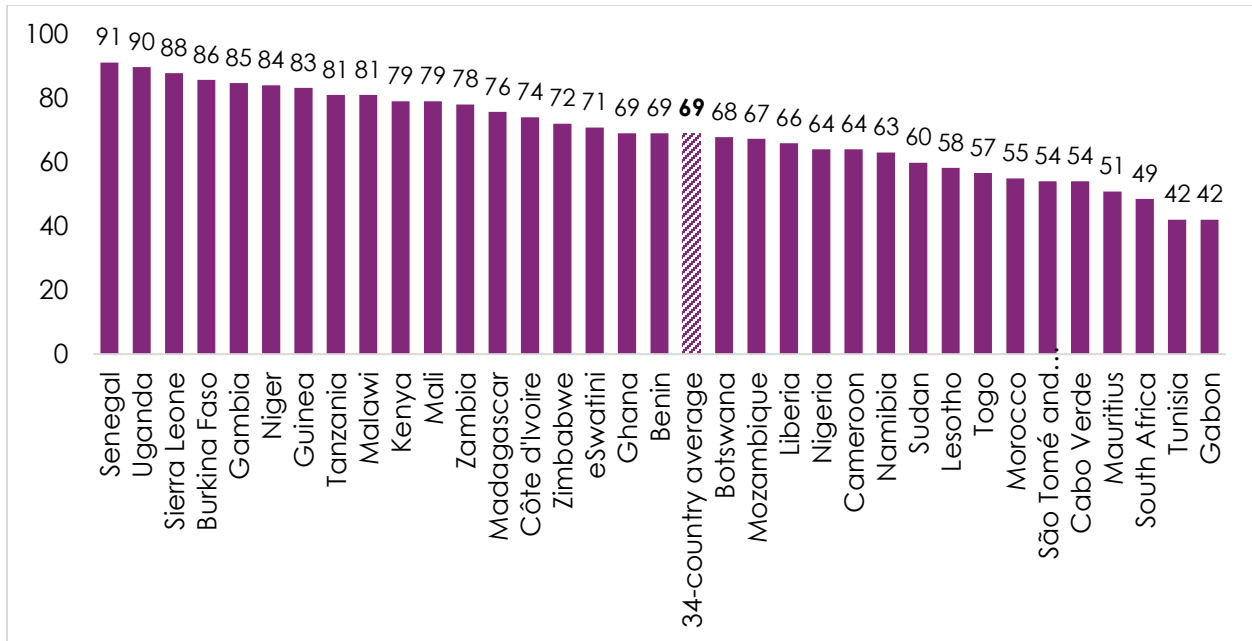
How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Religious leaders? (% who say "none of them")

Figure 9: Popular trust in key public officials | 34 countries | 2016/2018



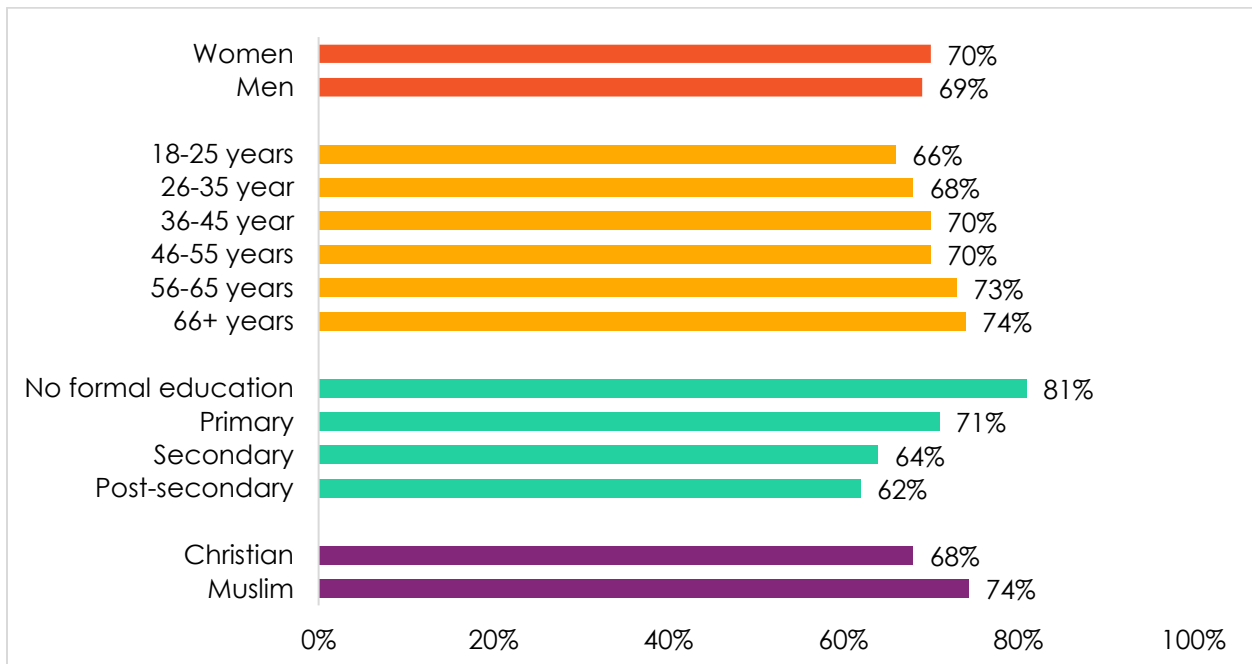
Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Religious leaders? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")*

Figure 10: Popular trust in religious leaders (%) | 34 countries | 2016/2018



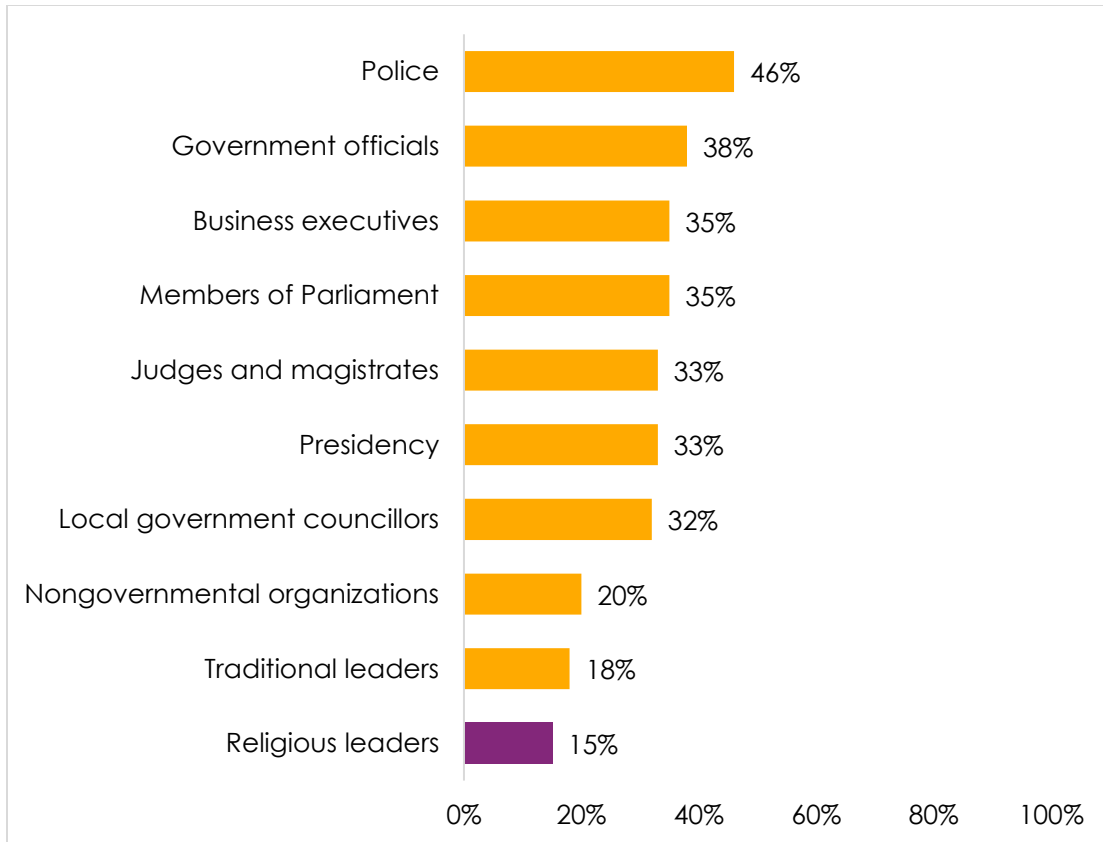
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Religious leaders? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 11: Popular trust in religious leaders | by socio-demographic group | 34 countries | 2016/2018



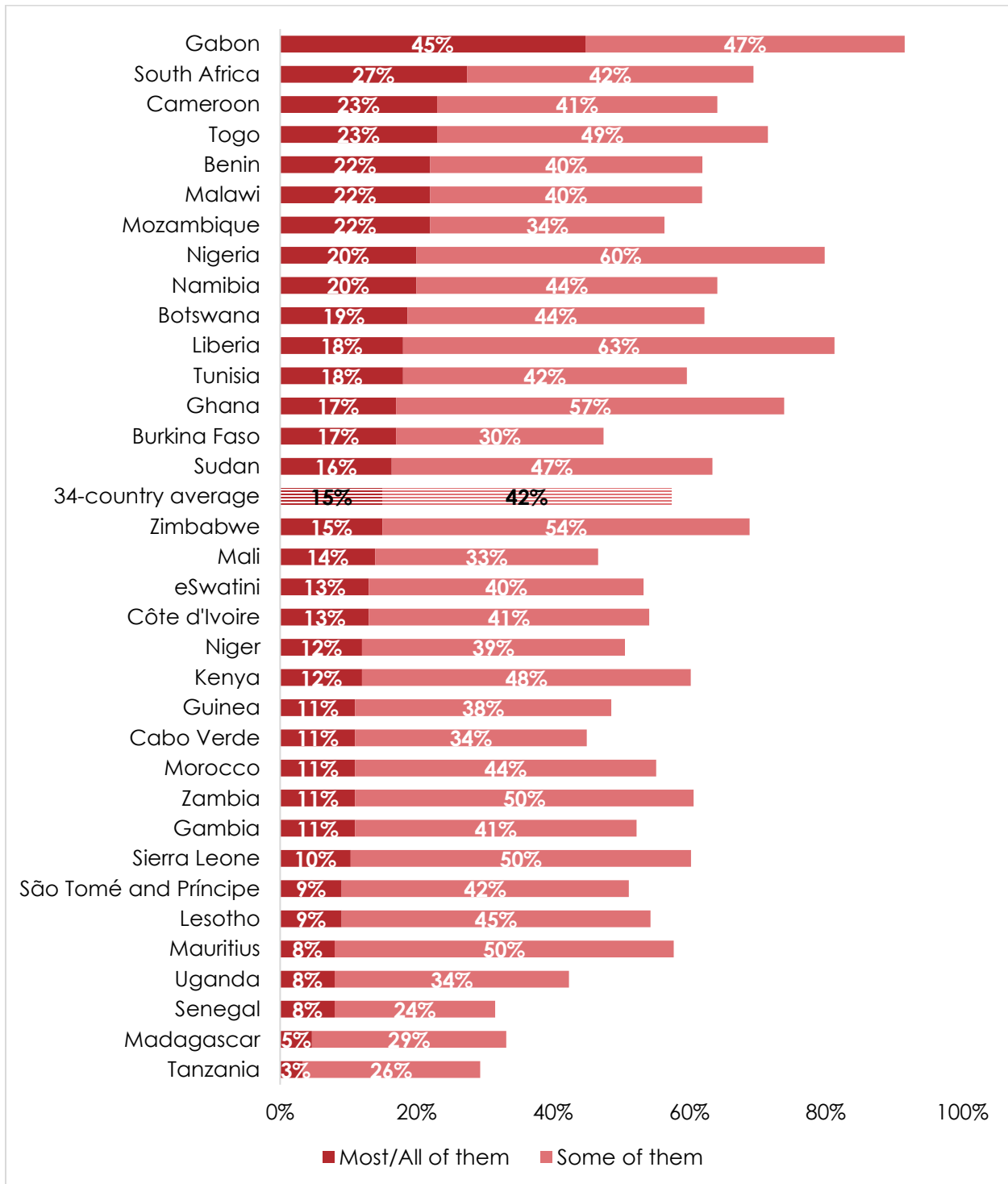
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Religious leaders? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 12: Perceived corruption among key officials | 34 countries | 2016/2018



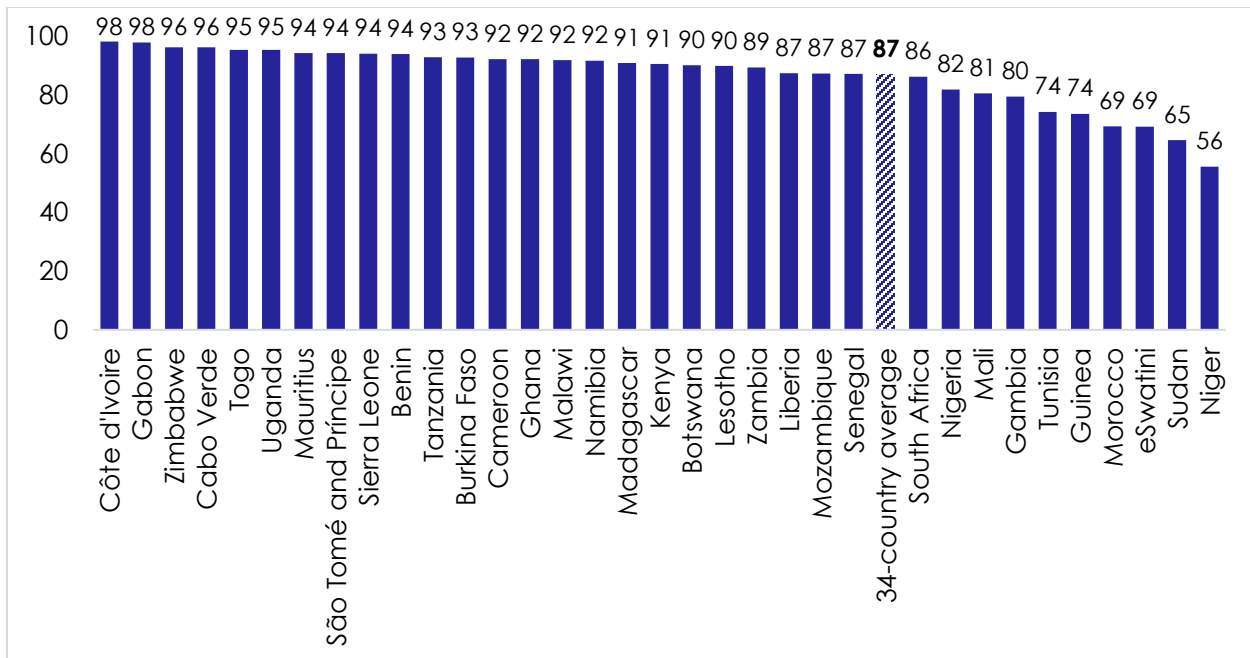
Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "most of them" or "all of them")

Figure 13: Perceived corruption among religious leaders | 34 countries | 2016/2018



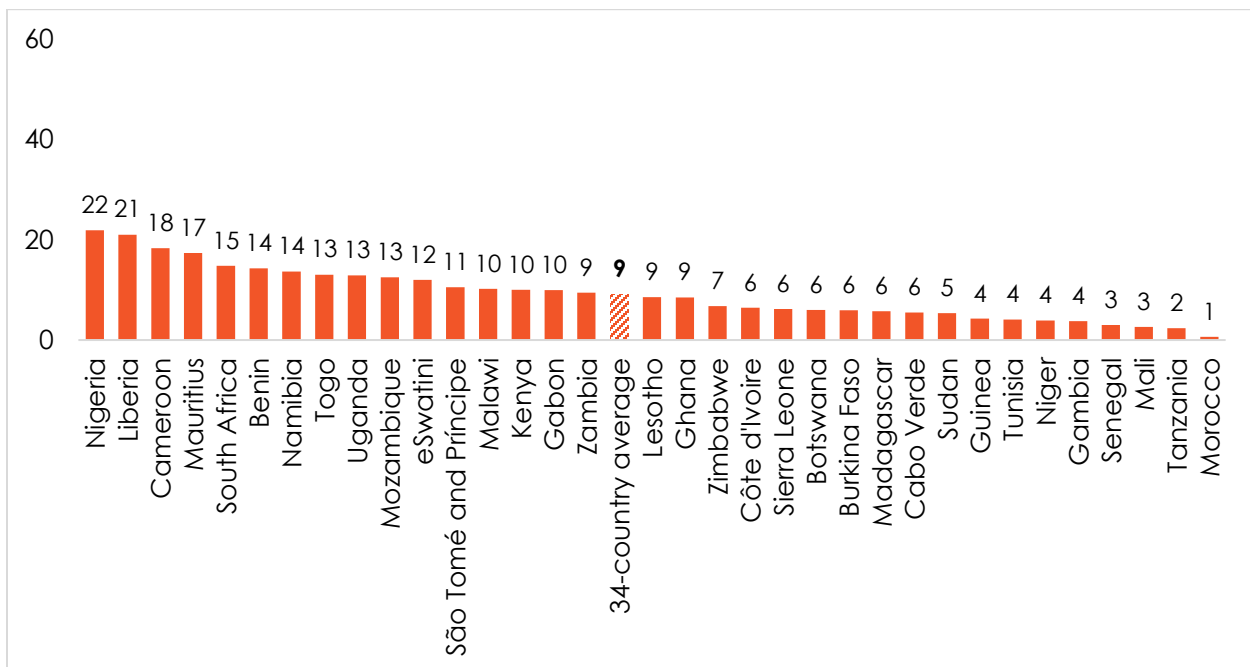
Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Religious leaders?

Figure 14: Tolerance of other religions (%) | 34 countries | 2016/2018



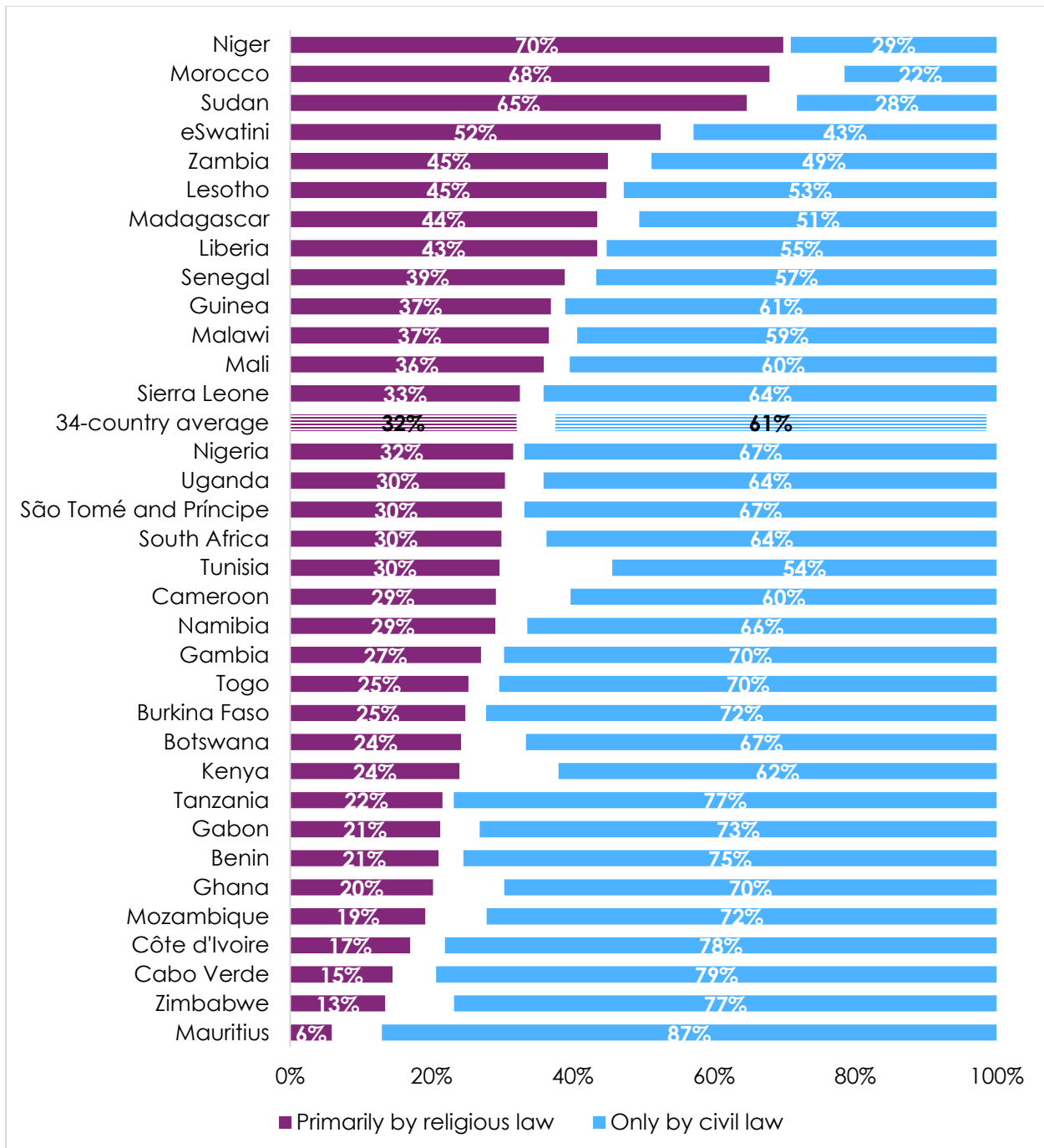
Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: People of a different religion? (% who say "strongly like," "somewhat like," or "would not care")

Figure 15: Discrimination based on religion (%) | 34 countries | 2016/2018



Respondents were asked: In the past year, how often, if at all, have you personally been discriminated against based on your religion? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "many times")

Figure 16: Should religious or civil law govern the country? | 34 countries | 2016/2018



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

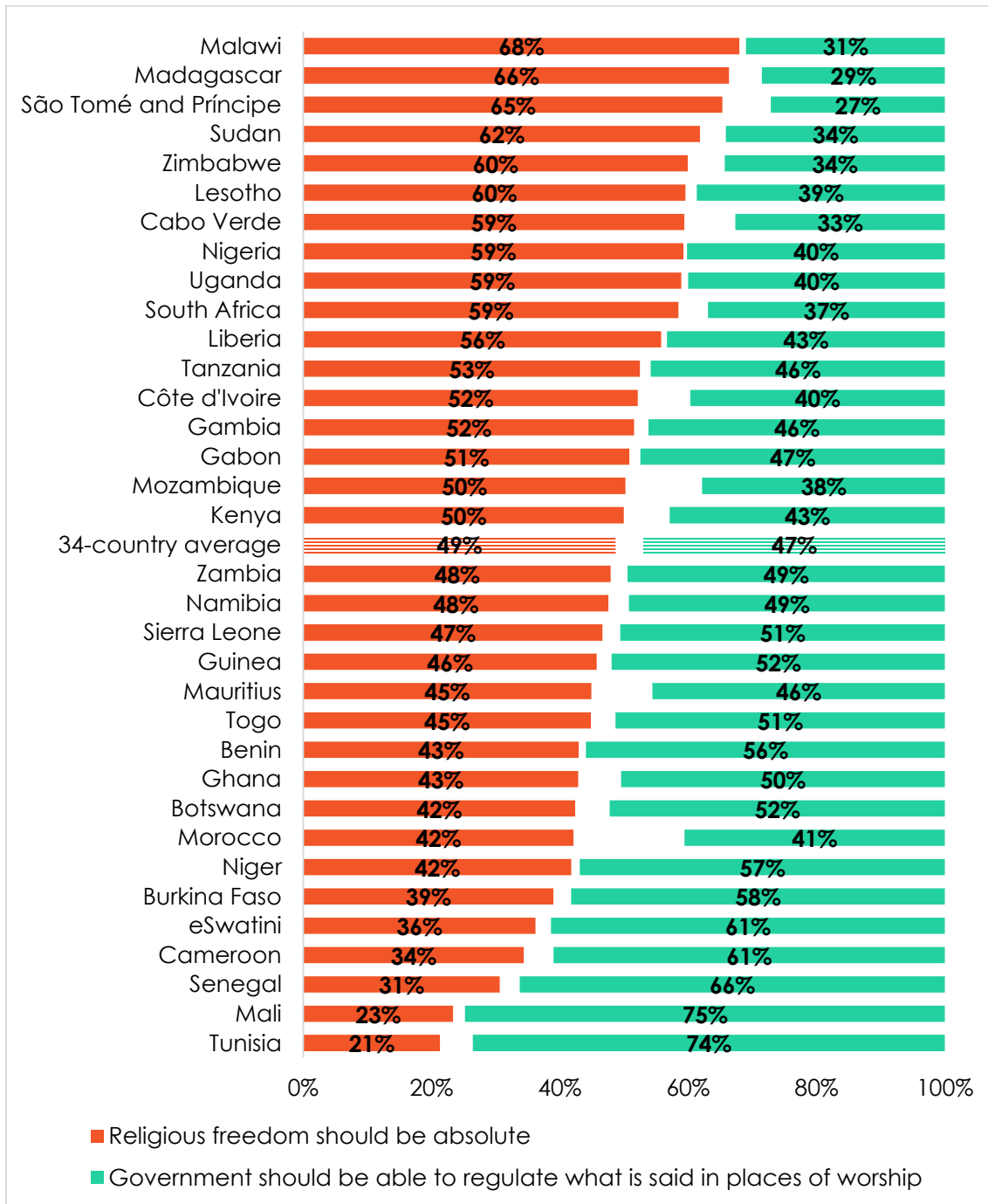
Statement 1: Our country should be governed primarily by religious law.

Statement 2: Our country should be governed only by civil law.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

(Note: In Kenya, this question was asked of only half the sample. Respondents who were not asked this question are excluded.)

Figure 17: Religious freedom vs. government regulation | 34 countries | 2016/2018



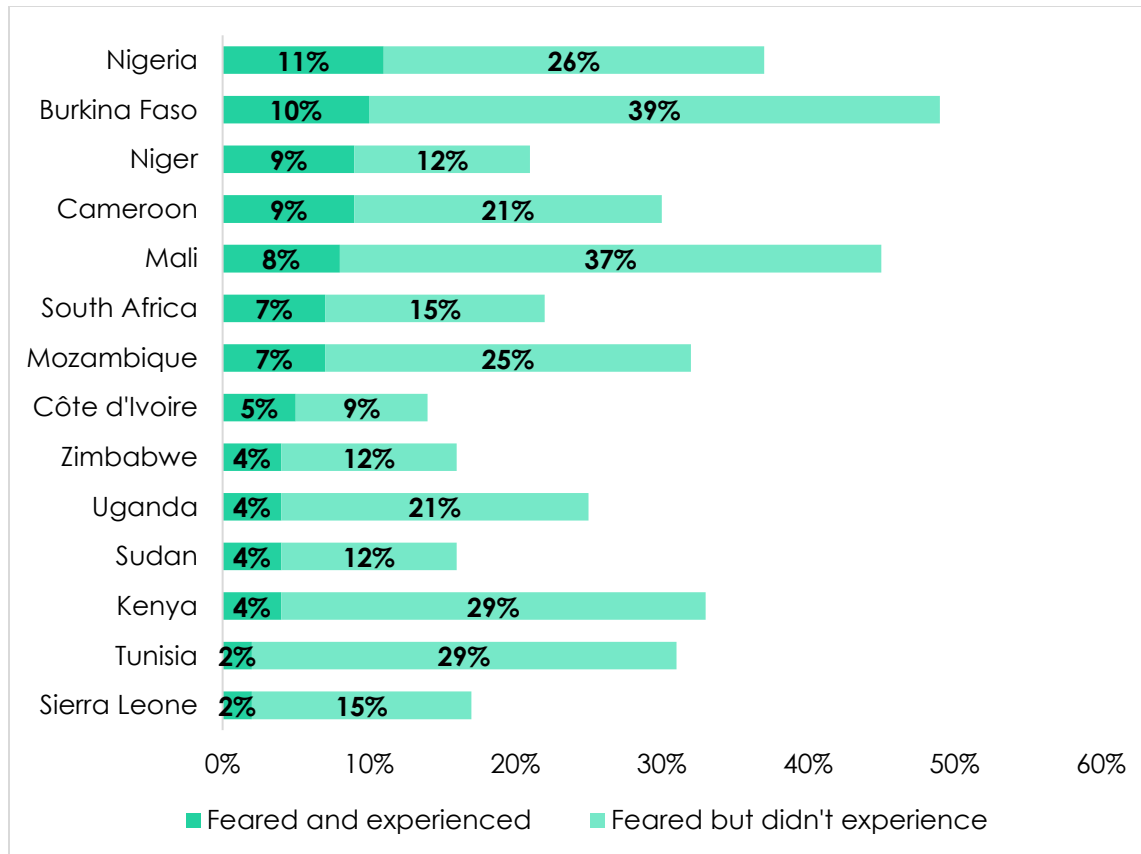
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

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 18: Fear and experience of extremist violence | 14 countries | 2016/2018



Respondents were asked: *In any society, people will sometimes disagree with one another. These disagreements occasionally escalate into physical violence. Please tell me whether, in the past two years, you have ever personally feared any of the following types of violence: An armed attack by political or religious extremists? [If yes] Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years?*

(Note: This question was only asked in 14 countries where political or religious extremists have been particularly active.)

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It is easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 7 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Months when Round 7 fieldwork was conducted	Previous survey rounds
Benin	Dec 2016-Jan 2017	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014
Botswana	June-July 2017	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014
Burkina Faso	Oct 2017	2008, 2012, 2015
Cameroon	May 2018	2013, 2015
Cape Verde	Nov-Dec 2017	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014
Côte d'Ivoire	Dec 2016-Jan 2017	2013, 2014
eSwatini (Swaziland)	March 2018	2013, 2015
Gabon	Nov 2017	2015
Gambia	July-August 2018	N/A
Ghana	Sept 2017	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014
Guinea	May 2017	2013, 2015
Kenya	Sept-Oct 2016	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014
Lesotho	Nov-Dec 2017	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014
Liberia	June-July 2018	2008, 2012, 2015
Madagascar	Jan-Feb 2018	2005, 2008, 2013, 2015
Malawi	Dec 2016-Jan 2017	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014
Mali	Feb 2017	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014
Mauritius	Oct-Nov 2017	2012, 2014
Morocco	May 2018	2013, 2015
Mozambique	July-August 2018	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015
Namibia	Nov 2017	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014
Niger	April-May 2018	2013, 2015
Nigeria	April-May 2017	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015
São Tomé and Príncipe	July 2018	2015
Senegal	Dec 2017	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014
Sierra Leone	July 2018	2012, 2015
South Africa	August-Sept 2018	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015
Sudan	July-August 2018	2013, 2015
Tanzania	April-June 2017	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014
Togo	Nov 2017	2012, 2014
Tunisia	April-May 2018	2013, 2015
Uganda	Dec 2016-Jan 2017	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015
Zambia	April 2017	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014
Zimbabwe	Jan-Feb 2017	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014

Previous Afrobarometer Round 7 Pan-Africa Profiles

- ✓ Dispatch 334: Prerequisite for progress: Accessible, reliable power still in short supply across Africa
- ✓ Policy Paper 61: Gains and gaps: Perceptions and experiences of gender in Africa
- ✓ Policy Paper 60: Change ahead: Experience and awareness of climate change in Africa
- ✓ Global Corruption Barometer – Africa 2019: Citizens’ views and experiences of corruption
- ✓ Policy Paper 58 : Africans want open elections – especially if they bring change
- ✓ Policy Paper 56: How free is too free? Across Africa, media freedom is on the defensive
- ✓ Policy Paper 55: Are Africans’ freedoms slipping away?
- ✓ Dispatch 290: Better but not good enough? How Africans see the delivery of public services
- ✓ Dispatch 288: In search of opportunity: Young and educated Africans most likely to consider moving abroad
- ✓ Policy Paper 54: Democracy in Africa: Demand, supply, and the ‘dissatisfied democrat’
- ✓ Policy Paper 51: Taking stock: Citizen priorities and assessments three years into the SDGs

Brian Howard is publications manager for Afrobarometer. Email: bhoward@afrobarometer.org.

Afrobarometer, a non-profit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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