

For religious leaders in Africa, popular trust may present opportunity, challenge in times of crisis

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 536 | Luyando Mutale Katenda

Summary

Around the globe, some religious leaders have won praise for fighting COVID-19 (U.S. Department of State, 2021; World Health Organization, 2020), while others have drawn criticism for helping the pandemic to expand (Lee, Lim, Xavier, & Lee, 2022; Maina, 2022). Both reactions reflect the power that religious leaders wield, highlighting their ability to influence the behaviour of billions (Blevins, 2020; Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, 2021).

In Africa, citizens' voices confirm this power. Findings from national surveys in 34 African countries in 2019/2021 show that adults overwhelmingly identify with a religious faith, and they are far more likely to trust religious than political leaders. Religiosity and views of religious leaders have important implications for many aspects of life, from the day-to-day practice of social tolerance to how communities respond to a global health crisis.



Based on interviews in 15 countries surveyed during the pandemic, popular views related to COVID-19 suggest that religious leaders still have considerable room to make a difference if they choose. Fewer than half of both Christians and Muslims indicate they are likely to try to get vaccinated, and a majority of all adults think that prayer is more effective than a vaccine in preventing COVID-19 infection, a belief that makes them less likely to say they will get vaccinated. But popular trust in religious leaders means that they could likely use their influence to increase vaccine receptivity.

In fact, those who say they trust religious leaders are already somewhat more likely to trust the government's ability to ensure that vaccines are safe, and less likely to say they will not get vaccinated, suggesting that religion and public health needn't be rivals for people's convictions.

On questions of religious tolerance and freedom, Africans overwhelmingly express welcoming attitudes toward people from different religious backgrounds, and most say that religious, ethnic, and racial diversity strengthen rather than weaken communities. Even so, findings show that religious discrimination by the government and other citizens still occurs.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. 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 analysis is based on 48,084 interviews in 34 countries surveyed in Round 8, between late 2019 and mid-2021 (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates). The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples.¹ When reporting multi-country averages, all countries are weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size). Due to rounding, reported totals may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of sub-categories.

Round 8 surveys took place in two groups: 18 countries were surveyed before the COVID-19 pandemic forced a halt to fieldwork in March 2020. Surveys in 16 more countries were completed between October 2020 and July 2021, during the pandemic. A set of questions on the pandemic were added to the questionnaire in 15 of these countries, and some of those findings are also reported here.

Key findings

Religious affiliation

- Most Africans (95%) identify with a religion. On average across 34 countries, more than half (54%) say they are Christian, while 36% identify as Muslim, 4% say they belong to other religions, and 5% identify with no religion ([Figure 1](#)).

Perceptions of religious leaders: Trust and corruption

- Religious leaders are more widely trusted and less widely seen as corrupt than any other group of public leaders the survey asked about ([Figure 2](#)).
- More than two-thirds (69%) of Africans say they trust religious leaders “somewhat” or “a lot.”
 - Popular trust in religious leaders is highest in Tanzania (94%), Niger (90%), and Ethiopia (90%). Majorities express trust in religious leaders in all surveyed countries except South Africa (42%), Sudan (47%), and Gabon (49%) ([Figure 3](#)).
 - Across 31 countries where this question was also asked in the previous two survey rounds, trust has decreased by 4 percentage points since 2014/2015. Twelve countries recorded significant declines (of more than 3 percentage points), led by South Africa (-21 points), Lesotho (-20 points), Sudan (-18 points), and Namibia (-17 points). Only Tanzania (+8 points) and Mozambique (+6 points) reported significant gains ([Figure 4](#)).
 - Trust in religious leaders decreases with respondents’ education level, from 80% among those with no formal schooling to 60% among those with post-secondary qualifications. Trust levels are higher in rural than in urban areas (75% vs. 62%) and increase with age, from 68% among 18- to 25-year-olds to 77% among those above age 65. Muslims (75%) are more likely than Christians (67%) to express trust in religious leaders ([Figure 5](#)).
- On average across 34 countries, 17% of Africans say that “most” or “all” religious leaders are corrupt – half as many as see widespread corruption in the Presidency (35%),

¹ The weighted Mozambique Round 8 sample is nationally representative except that it excludes rural Cabo Delgado, comprising 6.3% of the adult population of Mozambique. Insecurity and resulting difficulties in obtaining necessary fieldwork clearances prevented Afrobarometer from collecting sufficient data in this area.

Parliament (38%), and the courts (35%). In addition, 43% of respondents think that “some” religious leaders are involved in corruption, while 34% say “none of them” are corrupt ([Figure 6](#)).

- Gabonese (34%) and South Africans (31%) are most likely to see most/all of their religious leaders as corrupt. Fewer than one in 10 citizens agree in Tanzania (3%), Ethiopia (6%), Uganda (7%), Senegal (8%), Mauritius (9%), and Morocco (9%).
- Across 31 countries where this question was also asked in the last two rounds, average perceptions of corruption have held steady compared to 2014/2015. Five countries registered improvements of more than 3 percentage points, led by double-digit drops in the proportion of citizens seeing most/all religious leaders as corrupt in Sierra Leone (-15 points) and Liberia (-12 points). But perceptions of corruption among religious leaders rose significantly in nine countries, most sharply in Guinea (+13 points) and South Africa (+11 points) ([Figure 7](#)).

Religious attitudes and COVID-19

On average across 15 countries where the timing of Round 8 surveys allowed the inclusion of questions related to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Fewer than half of Christians and Muslims (46% each) said they were “somewhat likely” or “very likely” to try to get vaccinated. A larger share (54%) of respondents who identify with other religions or no religion indicated that they were likely to do so ([Figure 8](#)).
- Almost six out of 10 respondents (58%) said they believe that prayer is “somewhat more effective” or “much more effective” than a vaccine in preventing COVID-19 infection. Fewer than half as many (23%) thought a vaccine outperforms prayer, while 16% said the two are equally good at preventing infection by the virus ([Figure 9](#)).
 - Faith in prayer over vaccines was particularly widespread in Niger (89%), Sudan (87%), and Liberia (86%). Benin is the only surveyed country where a majority (51%) of citizens considered a vaccine better than prayer at preventing COVID-19.
 - Muslims (70%) were considerably more likely than Christians (53%) to see prayer as more effective than a vaccine. This belief showed little variation by gender, urban-rural location, or age, but declined with respondents’ education level, ranging from 72% of those with no formal education to 52% of those with post-secondary qualifications ([Figure 10](#)).
- Trust in religious leaders did not appear to increase vaccine hesitancy. In fact, the proportion of respondents who said they were “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely” to try to get vaccinated was higher among citizens who don’t trust religious leaders at all (61%) than among those who trust them “somewhat” or “a lot” (50%) ([Figure 11](#)).
- We also found no evidence that trust in religious leaders is correlated with less trust in the government to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe. In fact, people who trust religious leaders were more likely to trust the government to ensure vaccine safety (40%-41%) than those who don’t trust religious leaders at all (25%) ([Figure 12](#)).
- But as might be expected, vaccine hesitancy is significantly higher among citizens who believe that prayer is more effective than a vaccine in preventing infection. Six in 10 respondents (61%) who think prayer is “much more effective” say they are

somewhat/very unlikely to try to get vaccinated, compared to 40% of those who believe that a vaccine is more effective than prayer ([Figure 13](#)).

Religious tolerance, discrimination, and freedom

- Africans overwhelmingly express tolerance for people from different religious backgrounds. On average across 34 countries, almost nine out of 10 citizens (88%) say they “would strongly like,” “would somewhat like,” or “would not care” if they had neighbours of different religions, including strong majorities in all surveyed countries ([Figure 14](#)).
 - On average, these views have remained virtually unchanged in recent years. But eight countries have recorded significant gains (of more than 3 percentage points) in religious tolerance since Afrobarometer’s 2014/2015 surveys, led by Niger and Morocco (+14 percentage points each). Three countries have seen declines: South Africa (-7 points), Ghana (-5 points), and Côte d’Ivoire (-4 points) ([Figure 15](#)).
 - Religious tolerance is high across key demographic groups and increases with respondents’ education level, ranging from 81% of those with no formal schooling to 92% of those with post-secondary qualifications. Christians (90%) are somewhat more likely than Muslims (83%) to express tolerance for people from other religions ([Figure 16](#)).
- More than two-thirds (68%) of Africans value diversity, saying that communities are stronger if they are made up of people from different religions, ethnic groups, or races than if they are homogeneous. Kenyans and Tanzanians (82% each) are most likely to express this view, which is shared by majorities in 32 of the 34 surveyed countries. Tunisia (40%) and Malawi (48%) are the only exceptions ([Figure 17](#)).
- Despite these expressions of tolerance, about one in five Africans (18%) say they experienced discrimination because of their religion at least once during the year preceding the survey, including 10% who say this happened “several times” or “many times”. About one-third of Cameroonians (34%), Angolans (32%), and Mauritians (31%) report religious discrimination, while fewer than one in 20 citizens shared this experience in Morocco (3%), Tanzania (4%), and Guinea (4%) ([Figure 18](#)).
- Similarly, 17% of respondents say that members of their religious group are at least sometimes treated unfairly by the government, including 5% who say this is a frequent occurrence. Mauritius (43%) and Cameroon (41%) again top the list of countries reporting unfair treatment based on religion ([Figure 19](#)).
- Despite some experiences of religious discrimination, a majority of Africans see their countries as unified. On average, two-thirds (65%) say that despite religious, ethnic, political, economic, and social differences, there is “somewhat more” or “much more” that unites their citizens as one people than divides them. This feeling is particularly strong in Morocco (88%), Tanzania (87%), Senegal (85%), and Liberia (84%), whereas fewer than half of all citizens feel part of a unified nation in Gabon (42%), South Africa (46%), Malawi (47%), Lesotho (48%), and Mozambique (48%) ([Figure 20](#)).
- Views are sharply divided when it comes to potential trade-offs between religious freedom and security. On average across 34 countries, half (50%) of respondents say that “freedom of religion and worship are absolute, meaning that government should never

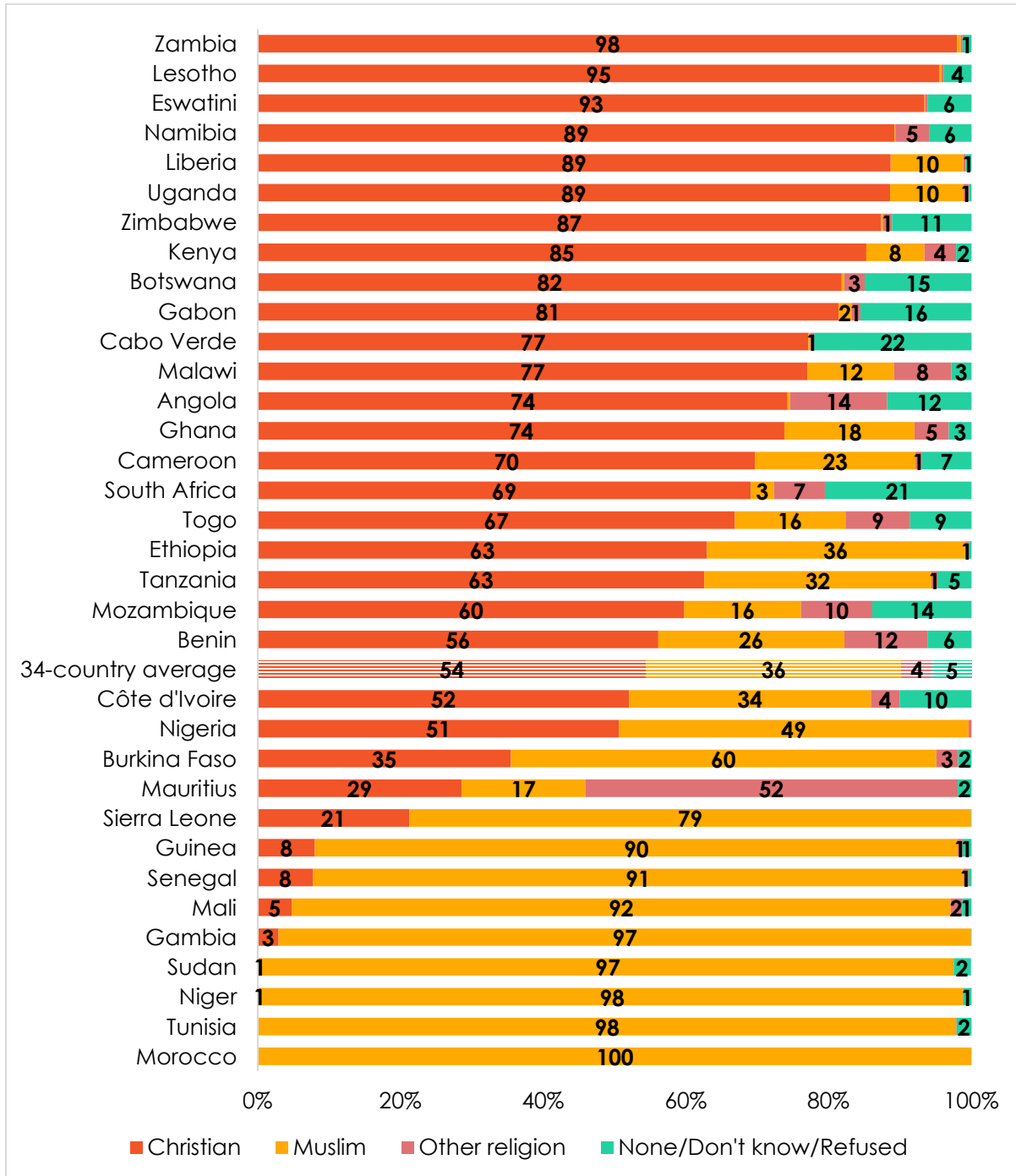
limit what is said in a place of worship." But almost as many (47%) say the government should be able to regulate what is said in places of worship, especially if it threatens public security ([Figure 21](#)).

- Some countries that have experienced extremist violence register below-average levels of support for absolute freedom of religious speech, including Tunisia (20%), Mali (29%), Burkina Faso (33%), Cameroon (38%), Niger (42%), and Kenya (44%).
- On average across 14 countries where Afrobarometer asked questions about violence by religious or political extremists, 6% of respondents say they personally experienced such violence during the previous two years, while 18% say they feared but did not experience it. Experience of extremist violence was most common in Nigeria and Cameroon (14% each), while levels of fear without actually experiencing violence were highest in Burkina Faso (34%), Mali (30%), and Mozambique (26%) ([Figure 22](#)).
- Christians and Muslims are about equally likely to report having experienced and feared violence by religious or political extremists ([Figure 23](#)).

Charts

Religious affiliation

Figure 1: Religious affiliation | 34 countries | 2019/2021

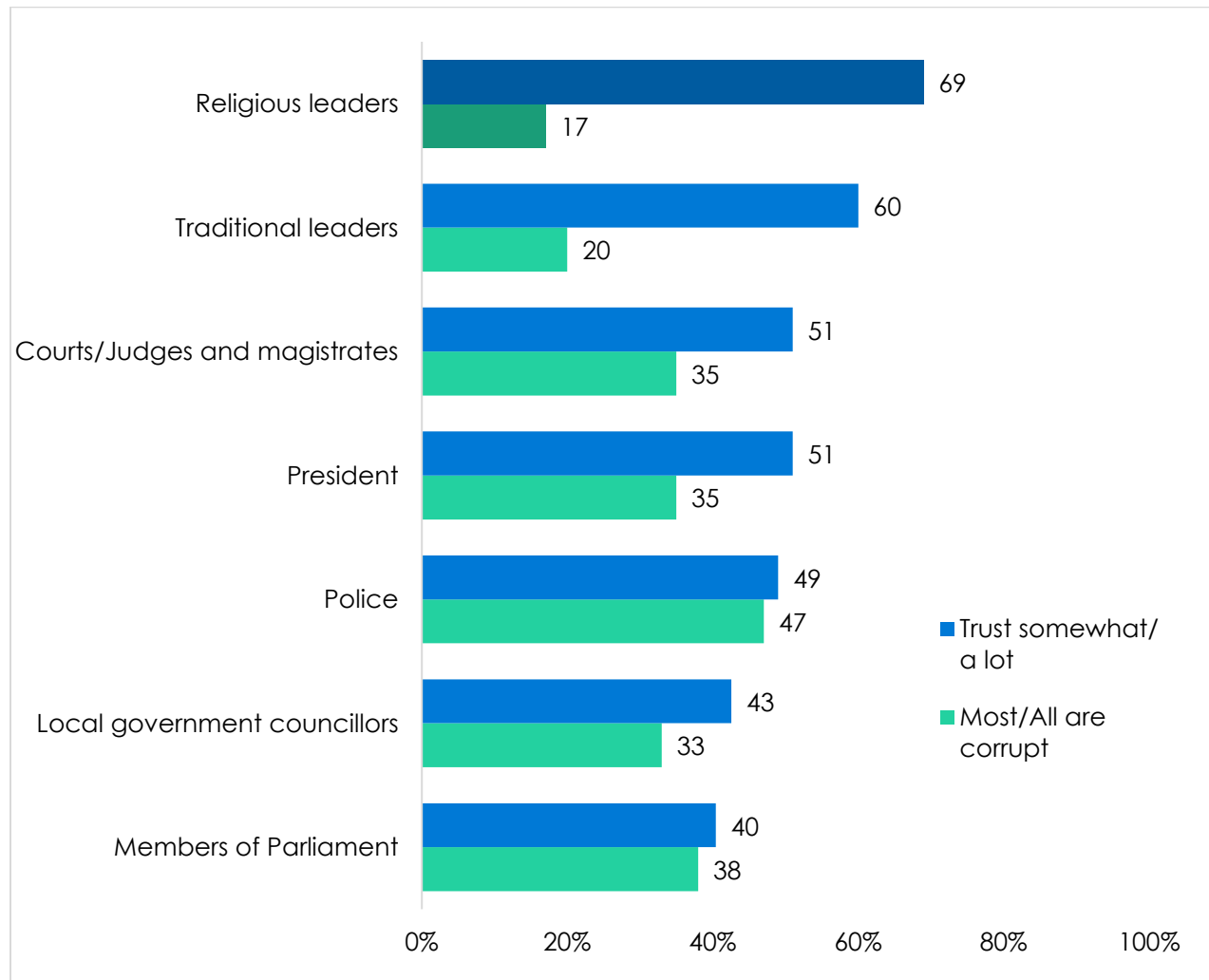


Respondents were asked: What is your religion, if any?

Perceptions of religious leaders: Trust and corruption

Trust in religious leaders

Figure 2: Popular trust and perceived corruption: Key public officials | 34 countries*
 | 2019/2021

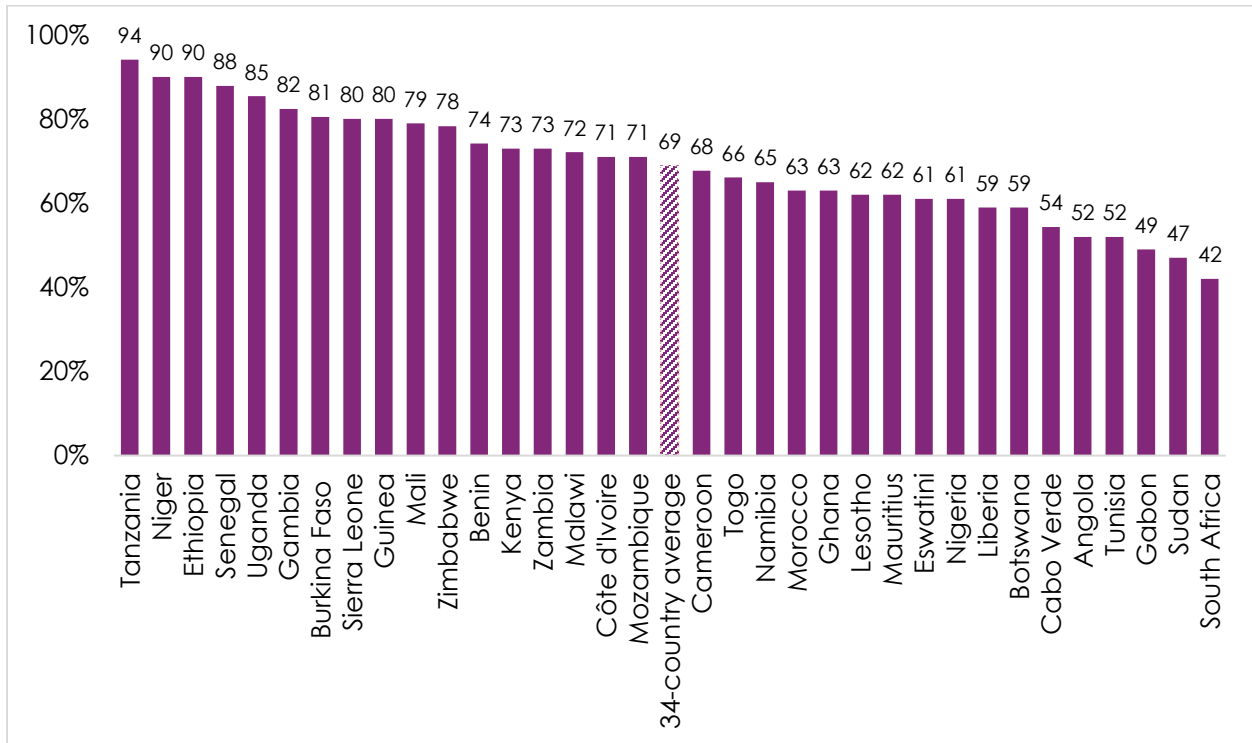


Respondents were asked:

How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?
 How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

(*Note: The questions about members of Parliament were not asked in Sudan. The questions about local government councillors were not asked in Angola and Sudan. The questions about traditional leaders were not asked in Cabo Verde, Tunisia, and Mauritius.)

Figure 3: Popular trust in religious leaders | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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 4: Change in popular trust in religious leaders (percentage points) | 31 countries
 | 2014-2021

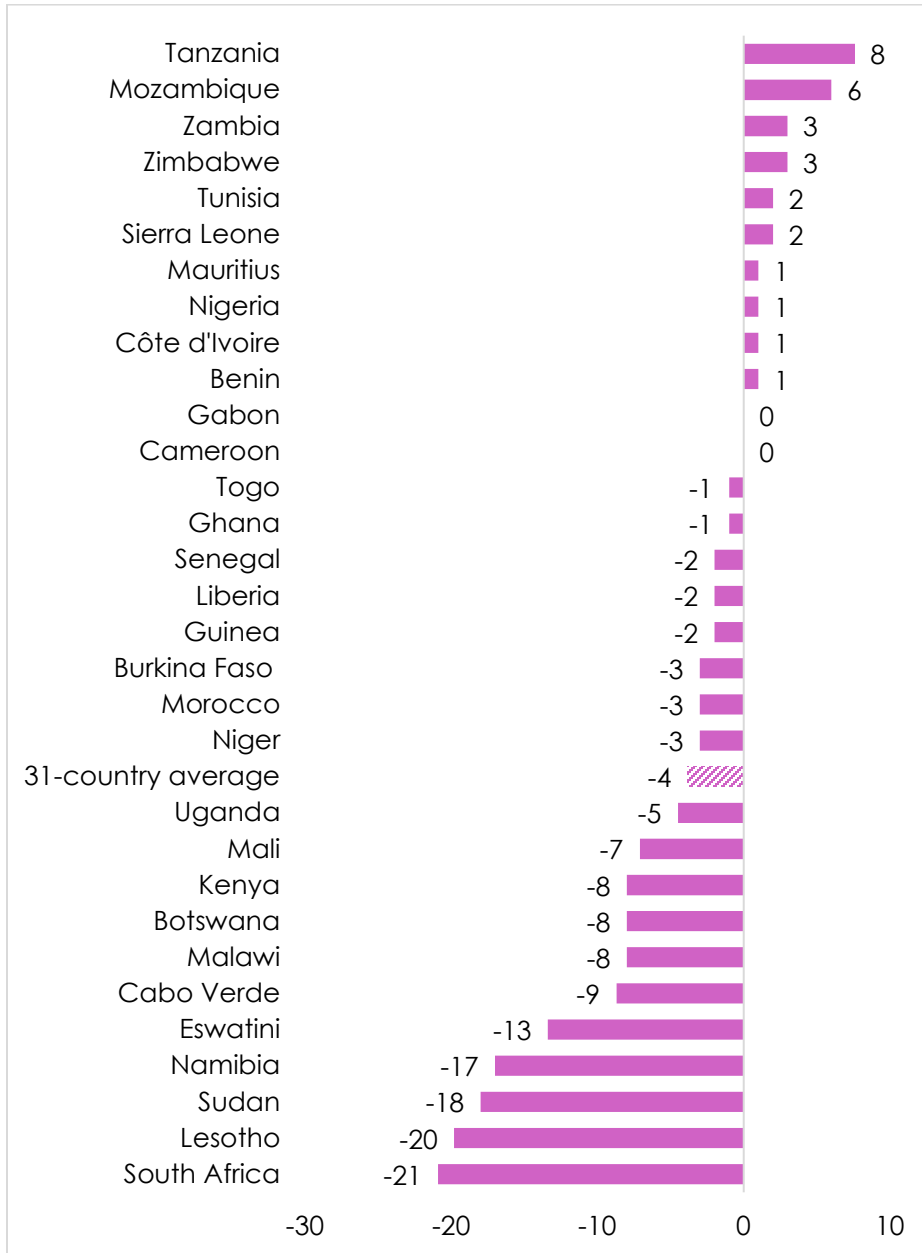
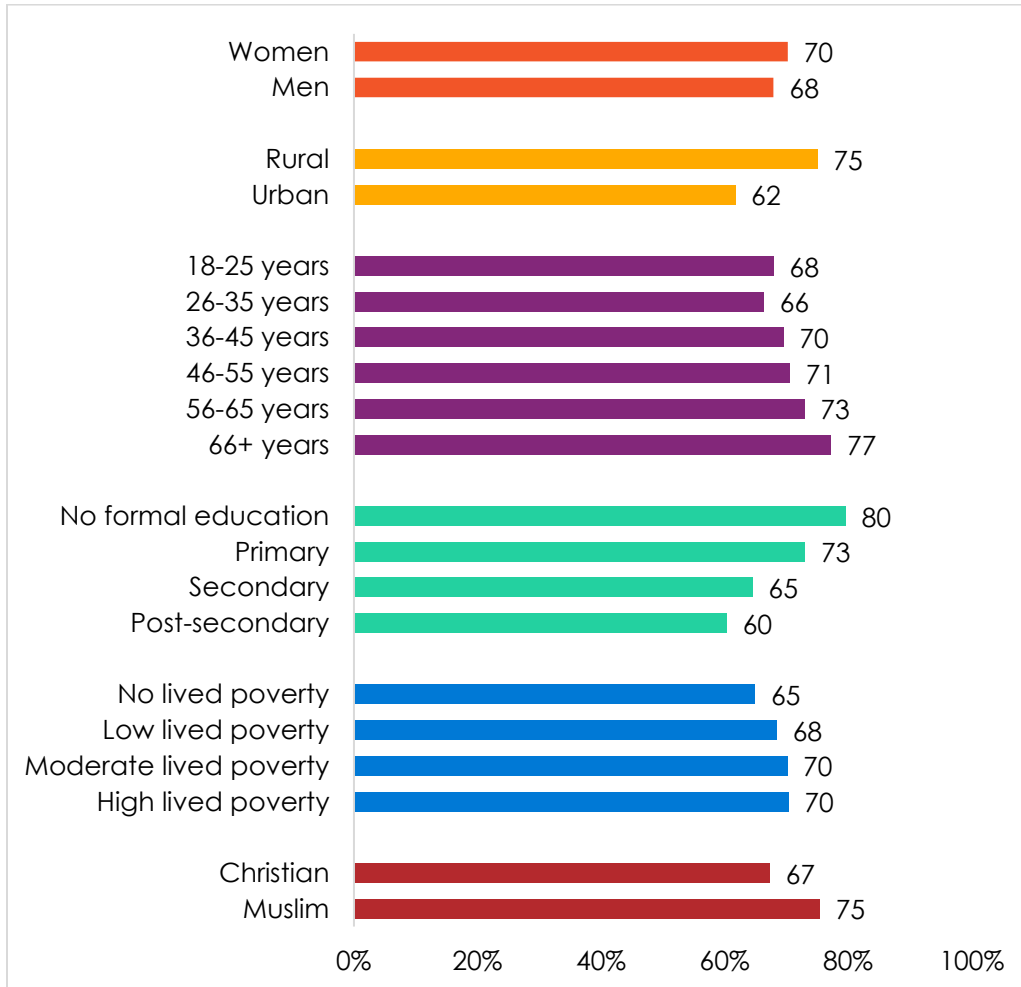


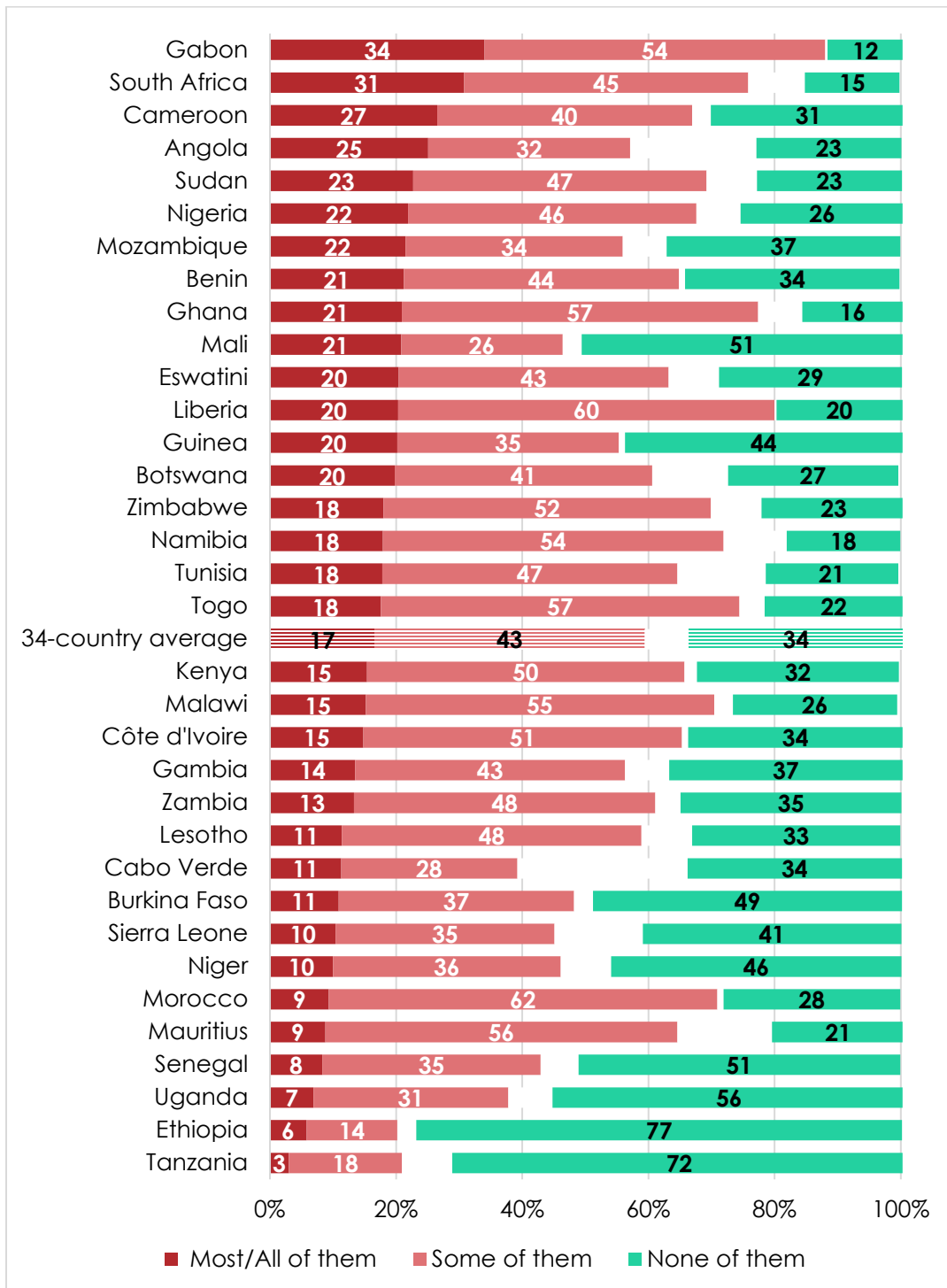
Figure shows the change (in percentage points) between survey rounds in 2014/2015 and 2019/2021 in the proportion of respondents who say they trust religious leaders “somewhat” or “a lot.” Positive numbers indicate increased trust. (Angola, the Gambia, and Ethiopia were not included in the 2014/2015 survey round.)

Figure 5: Popular trust in religious leaders | by socio-demographic group | 34 countries
 | 2019/2021



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 6: Perceived corruption among religious leaders | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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 7: Change in perceived corruption among religious leaders (percentage points)
 | 31 countries | 2014-2021

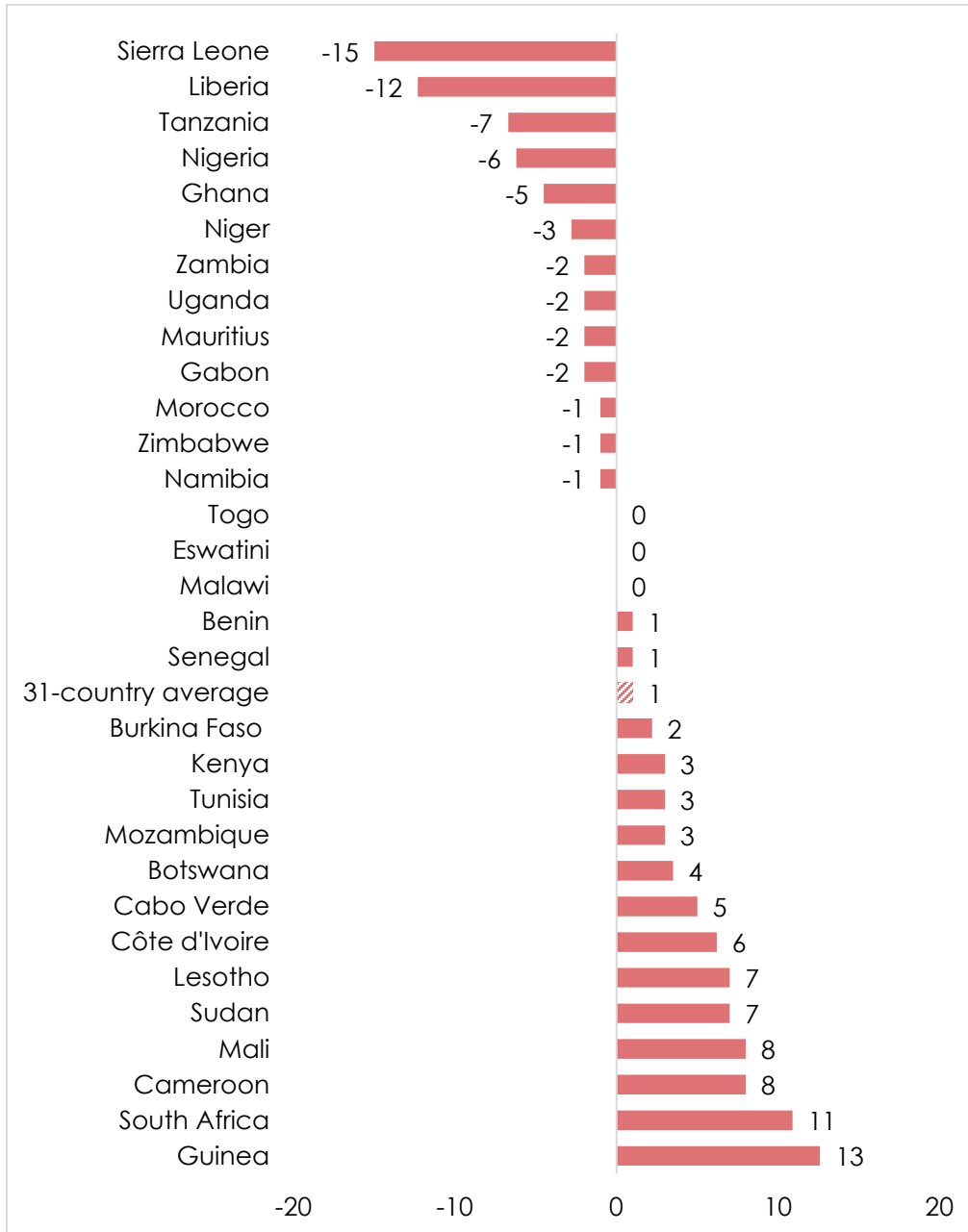
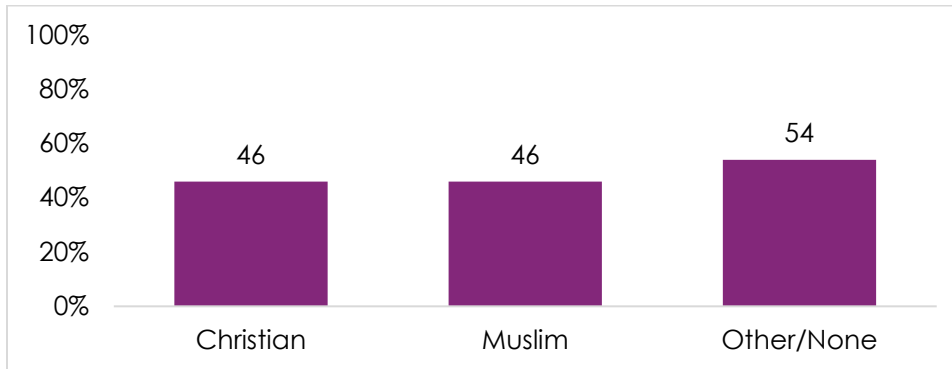


Figure shows the change (in percentage points) between survey rounds in 2014/2015 and 2019/2021 in the proportion of respondents who say that “most” or “all” religious leaders are corrupt. Negative numbers indicate improvement. (Angola, the Gambia, and Ethiopia were not included in the 2014/2015 survey round.)

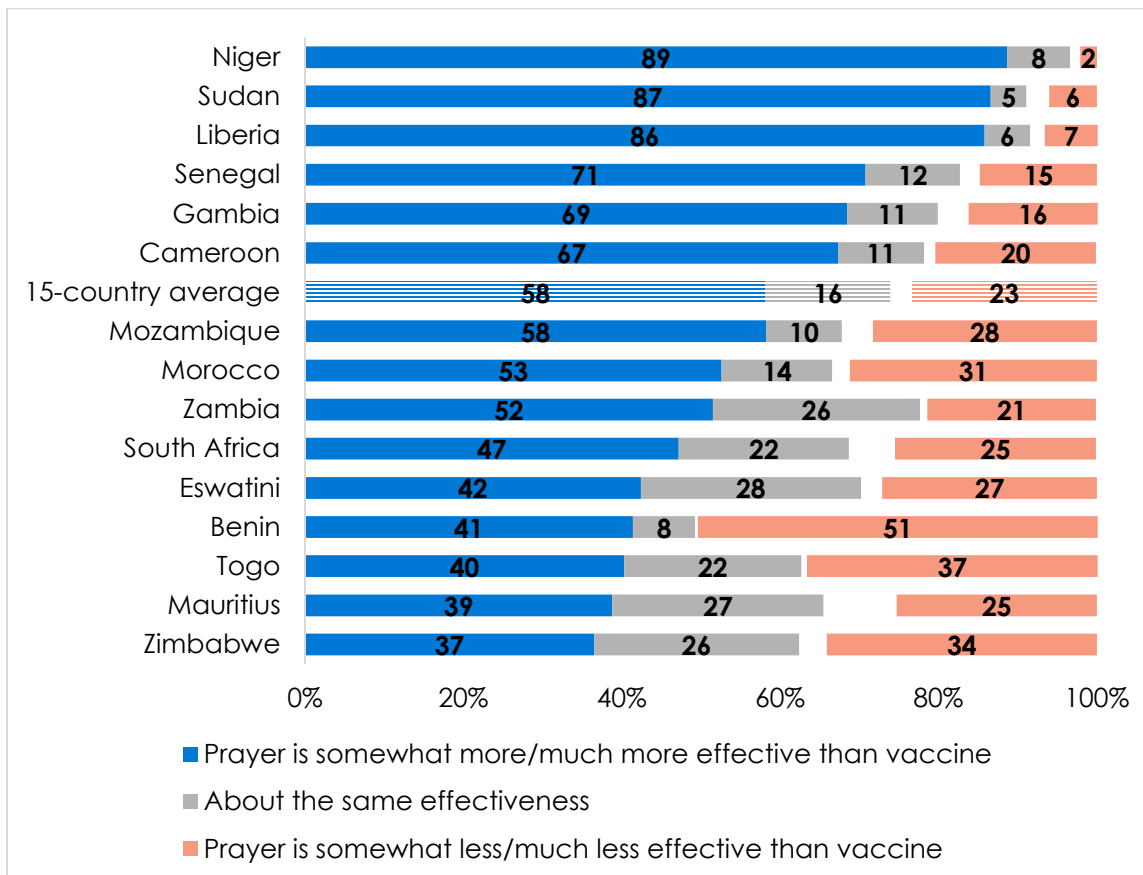
Religious attitudes and COVID-19

Figure 8: Somewhat/Very likely to try to get COVID-19 vaccination | by religious affiliation | 15 countries | 2020/2021



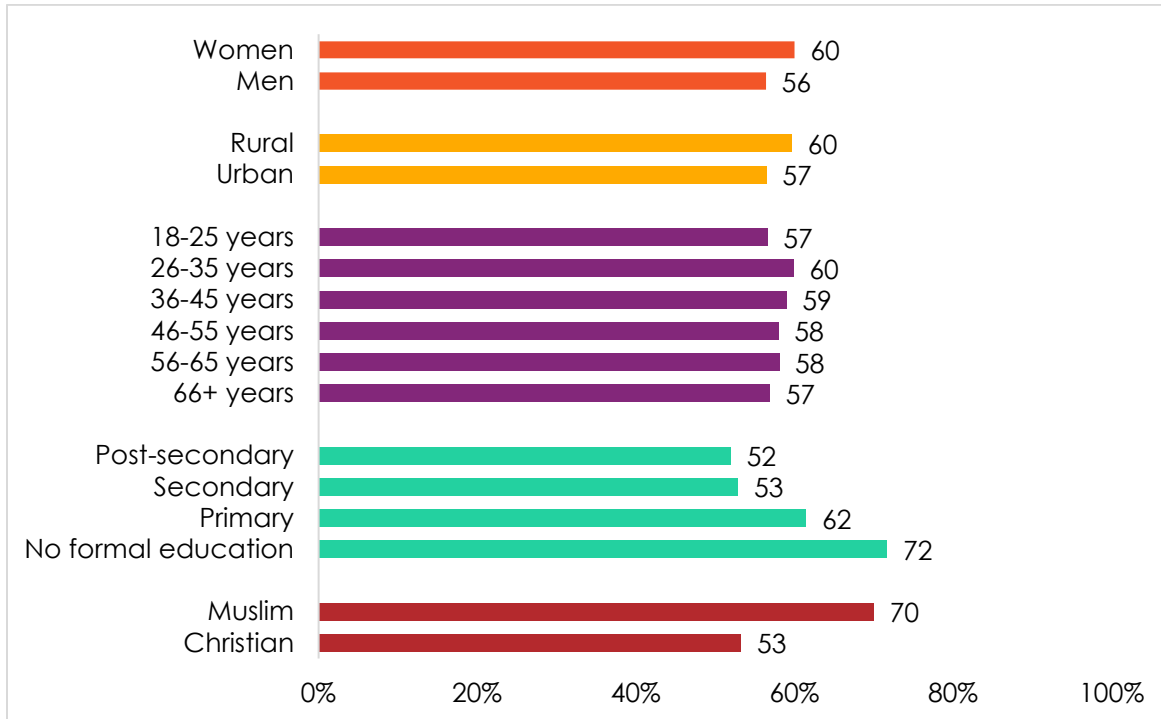
Respondents were asked: If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who say “somewhat likely” or “very likely”)

Figure 9: Is prayer more effective than COVID-19 vaccine? | 15 countries | 2020/2021



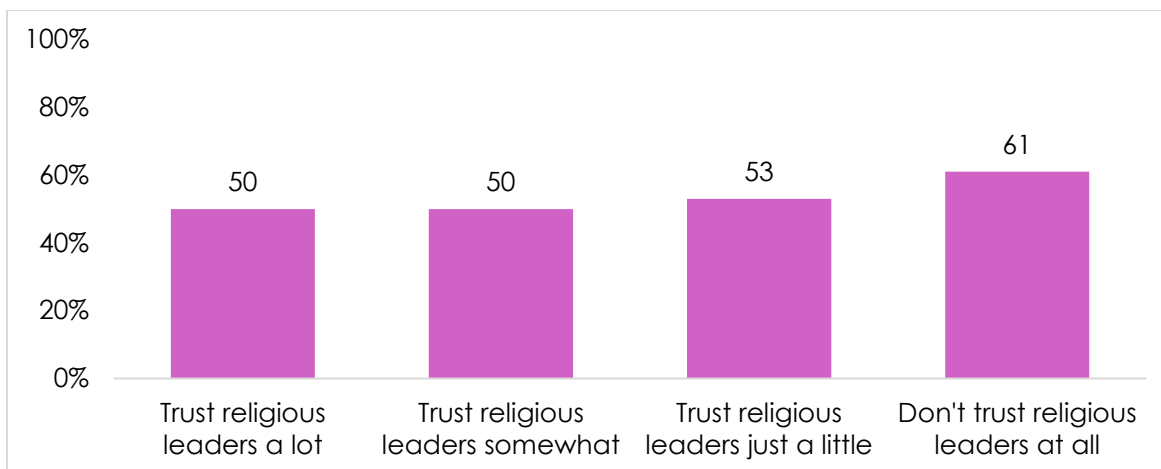
Respondents were asked: Do you think that prayer is more effective or less effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection?

Figure 10: Prayer is more effective than COVID-19 vaccine | by socio-demographic group | 15 countries | 2020/2021



Respondents were asked: Do you think that prayer is more effective or less effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection? (% who say prayer is "somewhat more effective" or "much more effective")

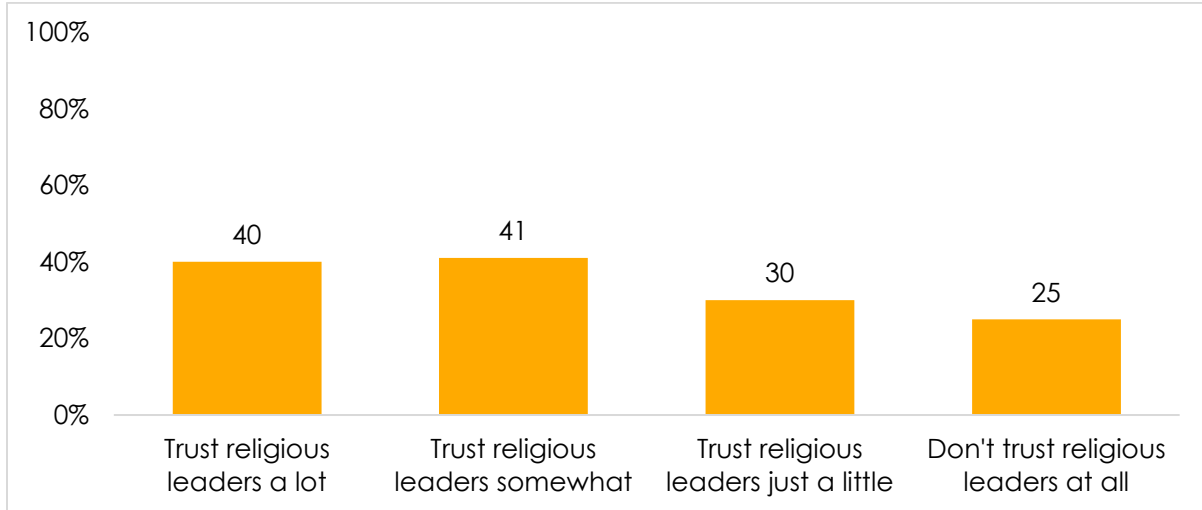
Figure 11: Vaccine hesitancy | by trust in religious leaders | 15 countries | 2020/2021



Percentages shown are for the question: If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who say "somewhat unlikely" or "very unlikely")

Reporting categories are based on the question: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Religious leaders?

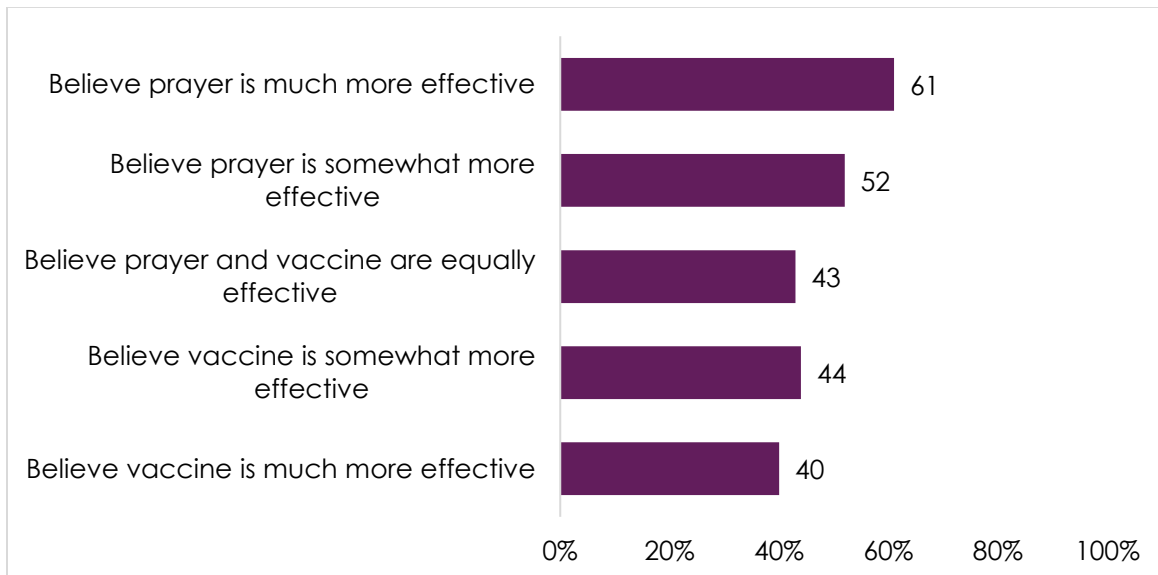
Figure 12: Trust government to ensure safety of COVID-19 vaccine | by trust in religious leaders | 15 countries | 2020/2021



Percentages shown are for the question: How much do you trust the government to ensure that any vaccine for COVID-19 that is developed or offered to citizens is safe before it is used in this country? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Reporting categories are based on the question: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Religious leaders?

Figure 13: Vaccine hesitancy | by belief in effectiveness of prayer vs. vaccine | 15 countries | 2020/2021

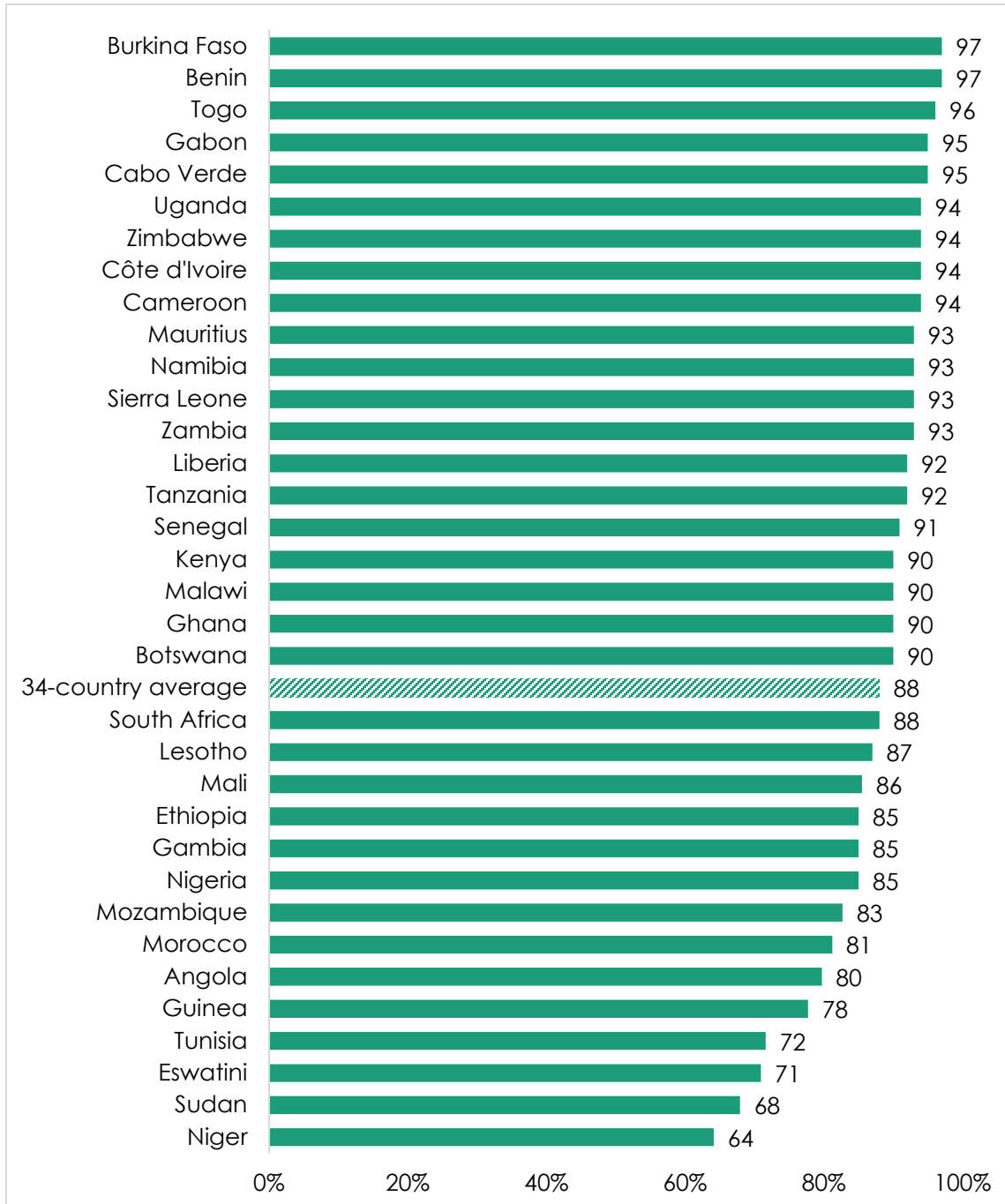


Percentages shown are for the question: If a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available and the government says it is safe, how likely are you to try to get vaccinated? (% who say "somewhat unlikely" or "very unlikely")

Reporting categories are based on the question: Do you think that prayer is more effective or less effective than a vaccine would be in preventing COVID-19 infection?

Religious tolerance, discrimination, and freedom

Figure 14: Tolerance for other religions | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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 "would strongly like," "would somewhat like," or "would not care")

Figure 15: Change in tolerance for other religions (percentage points) | 30* countries
 | 2014-2021

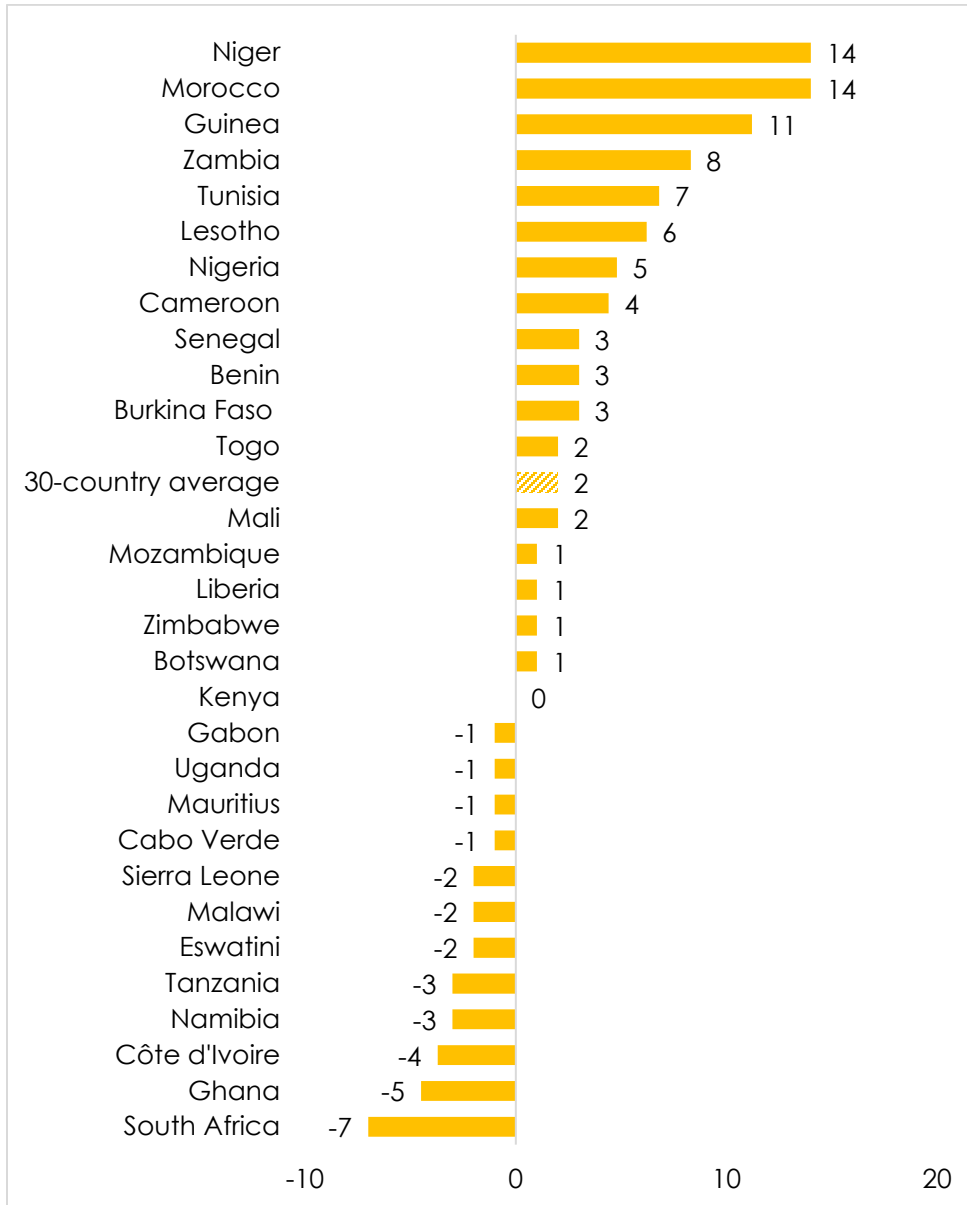
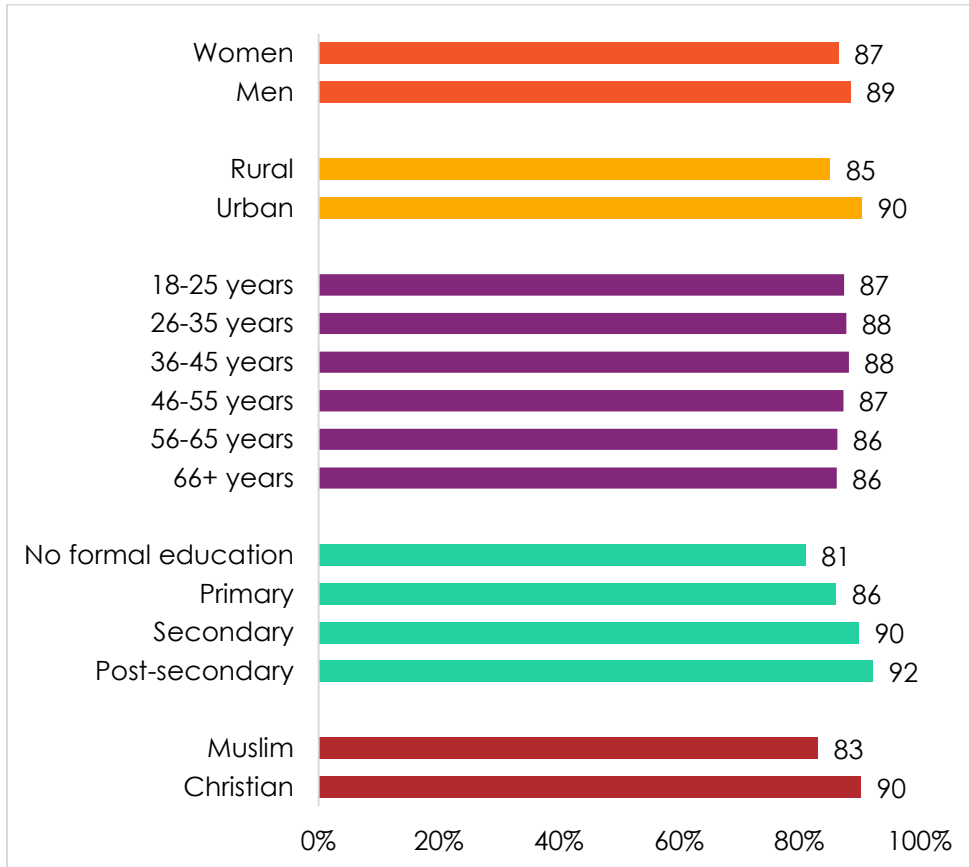


Figure shows the change, in percentage points, between surveys in 2014/2015 and 2019/2021 in the proportion of respondents who say they “would strongly like,” “would somewhat like,” or “would not care” if they had people from a different religious background as neighbours. Positive numbers indicate increased tolerance. (* This question was not asked in Sudan in 2014/2015.)

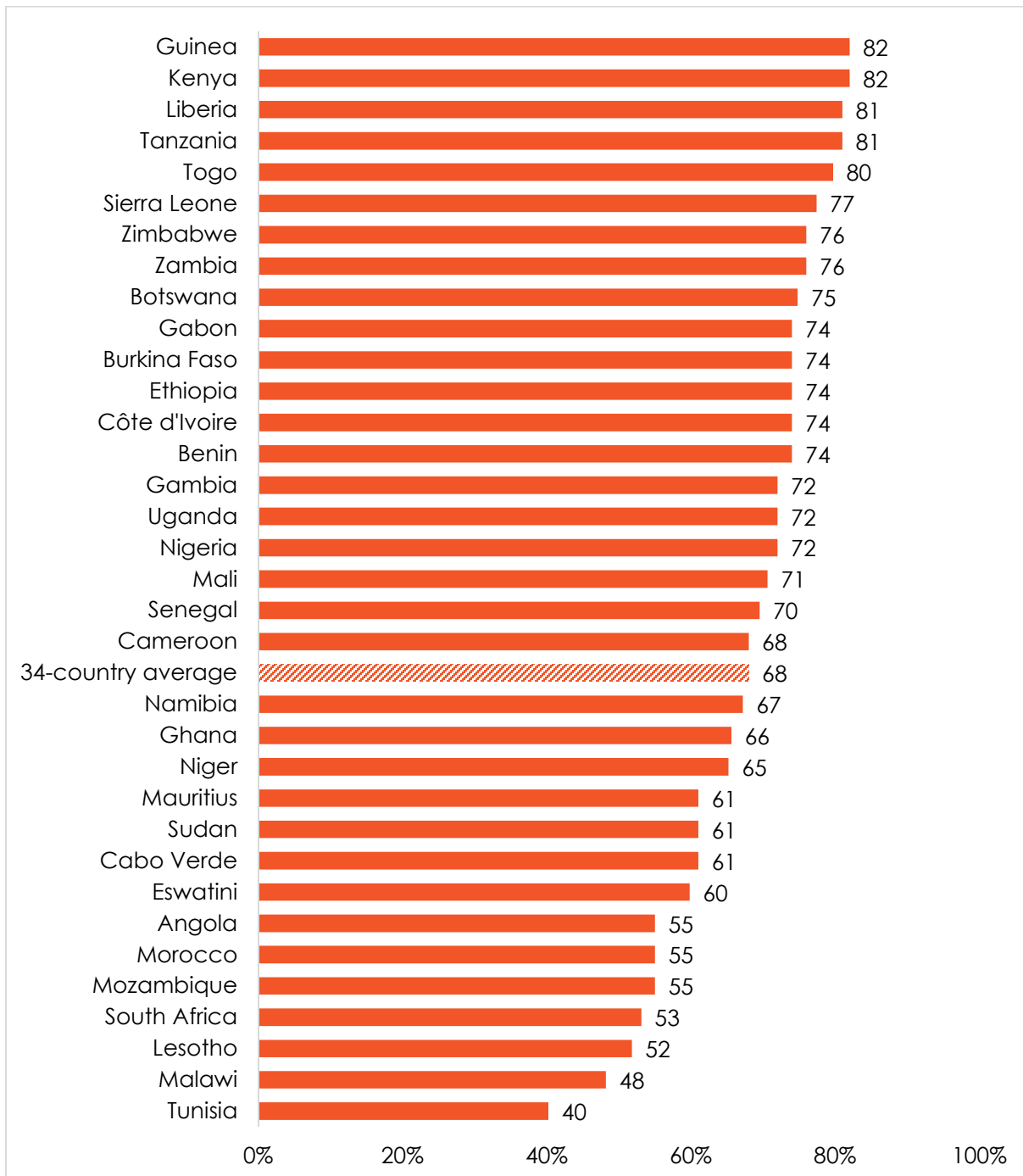
Figure 16: Tolerance for other religions | by socio-demographic group | 34 countries
 | 2019/2021



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 "would strongly like," "would somewhat like," or "would not care")

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.

Figure 17: Diverse communities are stronger | 34 countries | 2019/2021



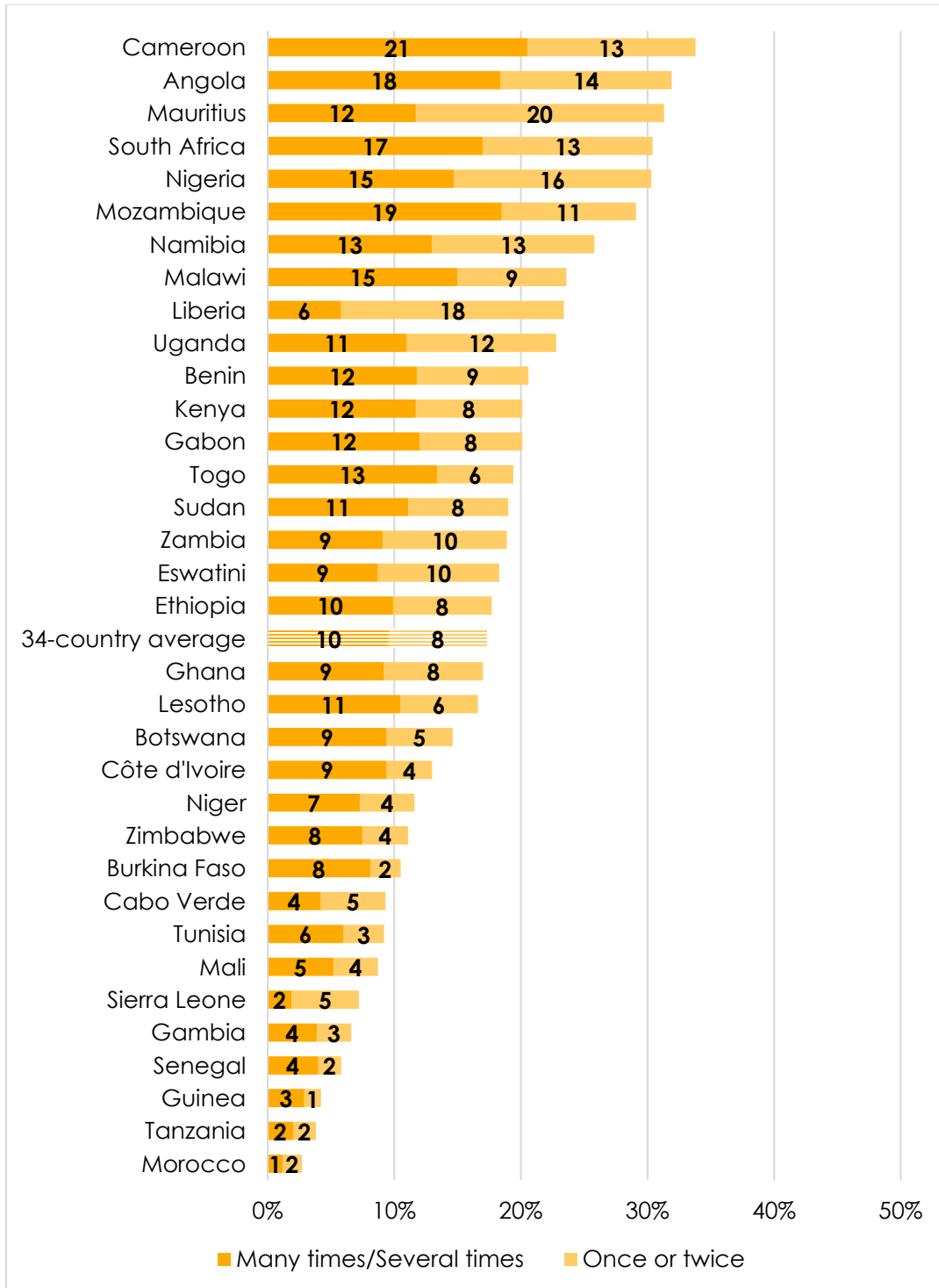
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Communities are stronger when they are made up of people from different ethnic groups, races, or religions.

Statement 2: Communities are stronger when they are made up of people who are similar to each other, that is, people from the same ethnic group, race, or religion.

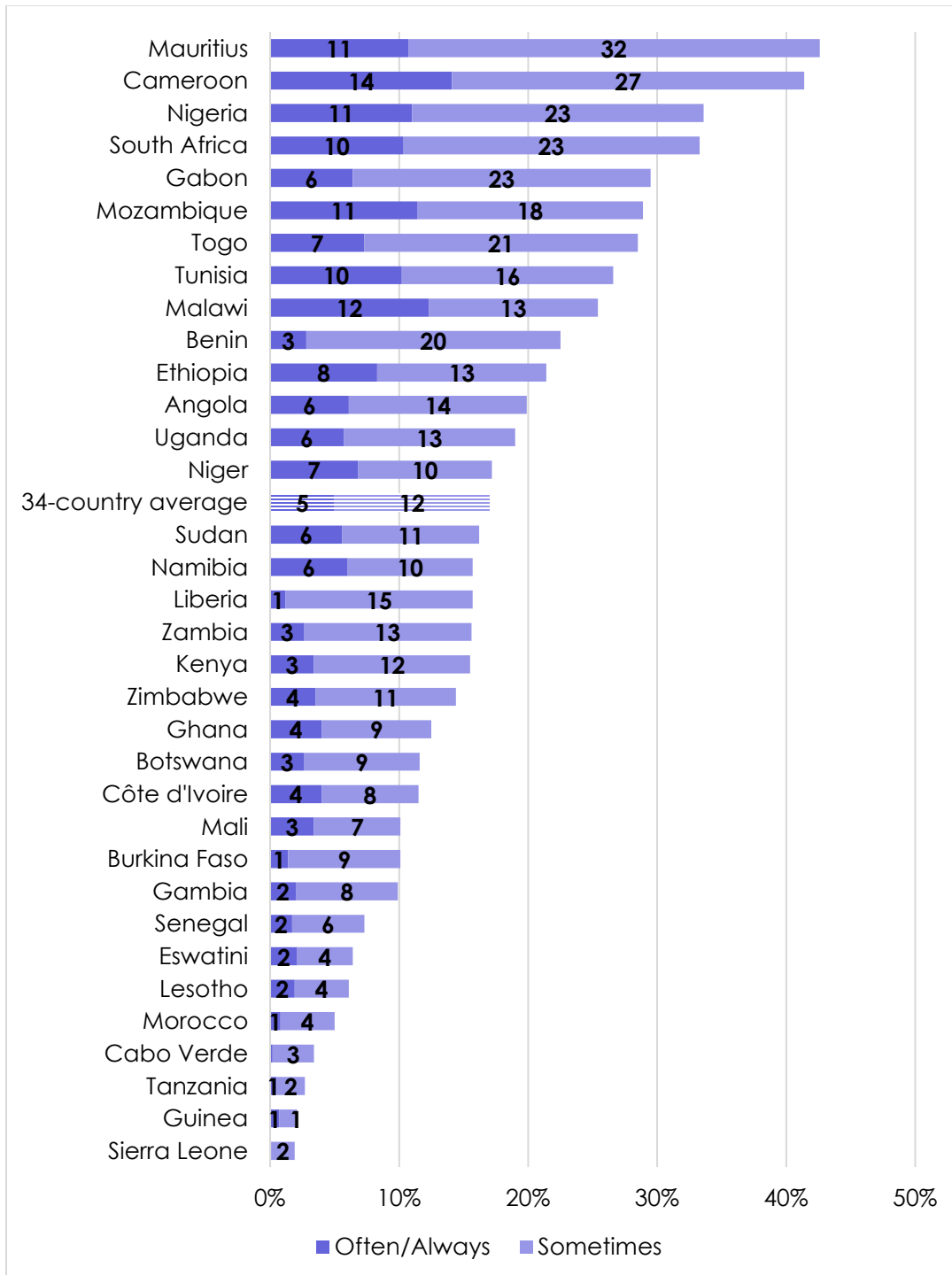
(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 1)

Figure 18: Discrimination based on religion | 34 countries | 2019/2021



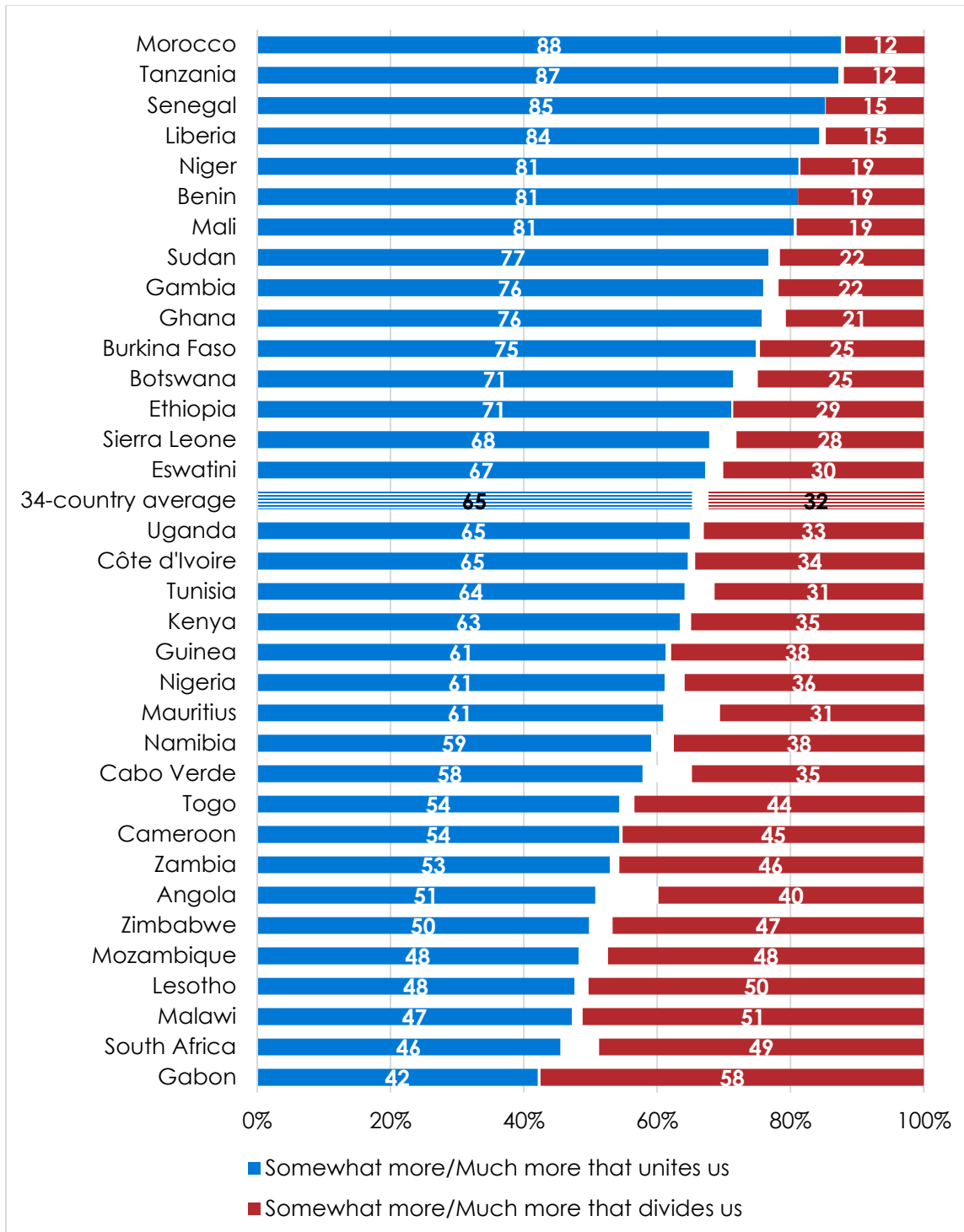
Respondents were asked: In the past year, how often, if at all, have you personally been discriminated against based on your religion?

Figure 19: Religious group treated unfairly by government | 34 countries | 2019/2021



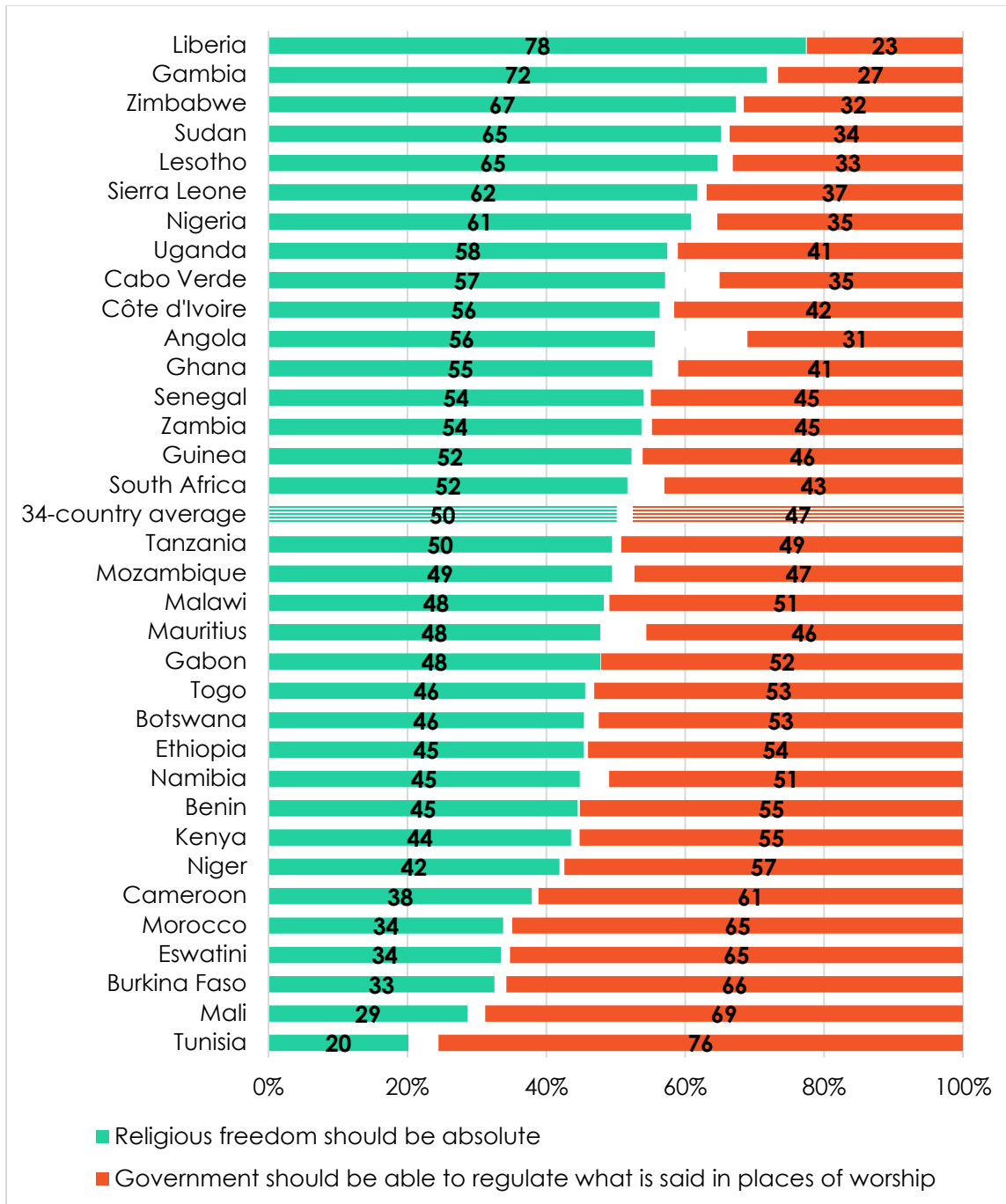
Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of the respondent's religious group] treated unfairly by the government?

Figure 20: More that unites or more that divides people | 34 countries | 2019/2021



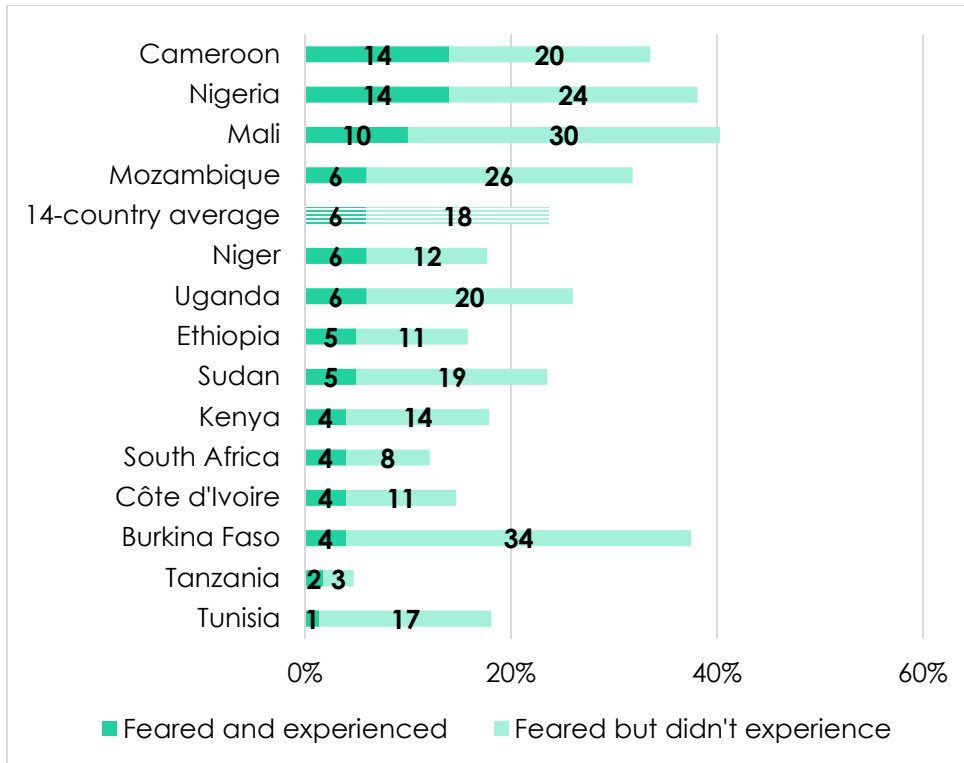
Respondents were asked: [Citizens of this country] are very diverse. They come from different religions, ethnic groups, political parties, and economic and social backgrounds. Overall, would you say that there is more that unites all [citizens of this country] as one people, or more that divides them?

Figure 21: Religious freedom vs. government regulation | 34 countries | 2019/2021



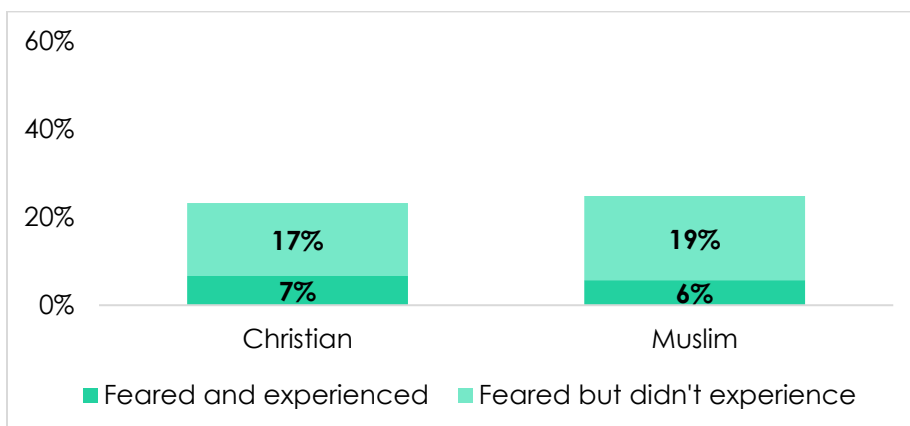
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Freedom of religion and worship are absolute, meaning that government should never limit what is said in a place of worship.
 Statement 2: Government should have the power to regulate what is said in places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

Figure 22: Fear and experience of extremist violence | 14 countries | 2019/2021



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

Figure 23: Fear and experience of extremist violence | by religion | 2019/2021



Respondents were asked: 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? (% "yes")

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 8 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Round 8 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Nov.-Dec. 2019	N/A
Benin	Nov.-Dec. 2020	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Botswana	July-August 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Burkina Faso	Dec. 2019	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Cabo Verde	Dec. 2019	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Cameroon	Feb.-March 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov. 2019	2013, 2014, 2017
Eswatini	March-April 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Ethiopia	DDc. 2019-Jan. 2020	2013
Gabon	Feb. 2020	2015, 2017
Gambia	Feb. 2021	2018
Ghana	Sept.-Oct. 2019	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Guinea	Nov.-Dec. 2019	2013, 2015, 2017
Kenya	August-Sept. 2019	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016
Lesotho	Feb.-March 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Liberia	Oct.-Dec. 2020	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Malawi	Nov.-Dec. 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Mali	March-April 2020	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Mauritius	Nov. 2020	2012, 2014, 2017
Morocco	Feb. 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Mozambique	May-July 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Namibia	August 2019	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Niger	Oct.-Nov. 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Nigeria	Jan.-Feb. 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017
Senegal	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Sierra Leone	March 2020	2012, 2015, 2018
Sudan	Feb.-April 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
South Africa	May-June 2021	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018
Tanzania	Feb.-March 2021	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Togo	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2012, 2014, 2017
Tunisia	Feb.-March 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Uganda	Sept.-Oct. 2019	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Zambia	Nov.-Dec. 2020	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017
Zimbabwe	April-May 2021	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan 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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