

Beneath the Apparent State of Affairs: Stability in Ghana and Benin

The Potential for Radicalization and Political Violence in West Africa

Clingendael Report

Peter Knoope
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January 2016

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About the authors

Peter Knoope is a career diplomat who was inter alia Head of Mission to Afghanistan and headed the Humanitarian Aid section at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Currently he is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, where he was the Director from its inception until August 2014.

Grégory Chauzal is a Senior Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute, where he specializes on security and terrorism issues, with a special emphasis on Sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb and the Middle East.

Clingendael Institute
P.O. Box 93080
2509 AB The Hague
The Netherlands

Email: info@clingendael.nl

Website: <http://www.clingendael.nl>

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all those who went out of their way and spent some of their precious time talking to us in Accra, Tamale, Cotonou and Porto-Novo. Special word of thanks goes to the Dutch MFA for sponsoring this project, and to the staff at the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Ghana and Benin; without their assistance it would not have been possible to write this report. We would also like to acknowledge our colleagues from the Clingendael Institute, particularly Bibi van Ginkel and Luc van de Goor, for their valuable assistance during and after the editing of this report, and Paul Görts for his thoughtful assistance with the template. It goes without saying that any mistakes that the reader may find in the text are exclusively those of the authors.

Abstract

Crises in the Sahel (from Mali to southern Tunisia and Libya) and the regionalization of Boko Haram's activities as far as the Lake Chad basin (Niger, Cameroon and Chad) are some of today's worrying signals related to West African stability. The question of a potential broadening of this 'arc of crisis' to stable countries in the region, including Benin and Ghana, motivated research in the field conducted by the Clingendael Institute. In Accra and Tamale in Ghana, and in Cotonou and Porto-Novo in Benin, the research team looked into religious, historic, political and societal dynamics that may constitute elements of future (in)stability.

New religious "ideologies" (Christian evangelism and/or Sunni revivalism), mixed with economic frustrations, have deeply impacted the traditional balance and make long-term stability a challenge for most of the countries in the region, from Mali to the Horn of Africa. The report explores the specific ways the Ghanaian and Beninese actors are dealing with politics, identity and societal stress. It also identifies the influence of external actors, from both the region and beyond, and potential spill over of nearby conflicts. The report comes to the conclusion that several issues, like border porosity, absence of a regional strategic approach to counter terrorism, youth frustration towards the elder's political and economic monopoly, rural and urban disparities and rampant illiteracy are some of the regional aggravating factors that are conducive to the spread of extremist ideology and dividing behaviours. This report can be considered as an early warning. What is urgently needed is early action.

Executive Summary

In this report of a research mission to West Africa, the authors describe (potential) tensions between religious denominations in the West African region, with a specific focus on Benin and Ghana. The report is based on extensive interviews during October 2015 that were conducted in Cotonou, Porto Novo, Accra and Tamale with labour unions, students, journalists, border policemen, Western and regional embassies, political and traditional leaders, and religious groups of all affiliations. The research mission's rationale was the assumption that causes for the divisions that are relevant to the tensions prevalent in Nigeria, Mali and Niger could also be identified in other West African societies because of their shared history and similarities in societal and political fabric.

The report examines potential societal divisions, or the *factors* that may create ingredients for conflict, but also looks at the *societal actors* that may engage in identity politics and seek to sharpen divides, rather than ease them. Societies develop systems to manage divisions and conflicts, so the existing conflict-management tools also receive attention in this report.

The research mission looked into the specific ways in which Ghanaian and Beninese actors are dealing with politics, identity and societal stress. The report gives a preliminary answer to the underlying question of whether these endogenous mechanisms are strong enough to keep the emerging identity related to societal divisions under control. It also identifies the influence of external actors, both from the region and beyond, and the potential spill-over of nearby conflicts.

The authors come to the conclusion that several issues, including border porosity, the absence of a regional strategic approach to counter terrorism, youths' frustration about the elders' political and economic monopoly, rural and urban disparities and rampant illiteracy, are some of the regional aggravating factors that are conducive to the spread of extremist ideology and dividing behaviours.

New religious 'ideologies' (such as Christian evangelism and Sunni revivalism), together with economic frustrations, have deeply impacted the traditional balance and make long-term stability a challenge for most of the countries in the region, from Mali to the Horn of Africa. The research mission found that these trends are also relevant for Ghana and Benin, however apparently stable these two countries appear for the moment. These trends impact Ghana and Benin because of their geographic location, their socio-economic (im)balance and the religious competition at play.

Contrary to common perceptions and/or existing examples in the West African region, north-south divisions within the countries do not systematically endanger the national identity, but could accelerate alienation in and between communities, especially in peripheral and neglected areas. Electoral exploitation and sectarian vitality appear to be the main factors for tensions in that context. They exacerbate divisions between communities and ignite the historic, and sometimes artificial, splits. Self-protecting behaviours and the generational ascent of local leaders weaken their capacity for social control and deprive them of, at least part of, their influence over segments of the community, mostly the youth. The report states that the appropriation of power and state resources by ageing elites represents a major source of current societal tensions, which could easily degenerate into open violence in the middle term.

In Ghana, growing Sunni support is mobilizing a new generation of worshippers. This is based on ballooning economic despair, which provides fertile soil for anti-elite, anti-Western, anti-clergy and anti-elders, etc., narratives. It gives these religious 'players' a symbolic and comparative advantage over the old, existing hierarchies. In Benin, these same factors pose a more acute risk because of the proximity of the Boko Haram front and the recruitment activities reported within the country by Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau's organization.

The report concludes that the combination of all of the factors mentioned, and the presence of infiltrators and local charismatic religious leaders, on both the Christian and Muslim sides, makes today's situation highly volatile, with non-negligible risks of inter-generational or inter- and intra-religious tensions. The report adds to this already worrying picture that West Africa is increasingly exploited by outsiders for 'religious proxy wars'. Border porosity, a regional continuum of human communities, shared religion, cultural values and behaviour are factors that directly encourage these regional and international 'plugs'. There are influences coming from the Maghreb and the Middle East, from countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Egypt that directly spread foreign Islamic trends. The same situation prevails on the Christian side, with intense competition among Catholic and Protestant organizations to attract new followers. Newcomers, such as the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, are even more aggressive in terms of communication and proselytism and are generally better funded than their old Catholic counterparts. These American evangelist-inspired movements disrupt the local religious equilibrium, with divisive results for Christian communities.

On the other hand, there are institutional and functional balances in both countries that play a catalysing role in fostering national dialogues and guaranteeing peace. The report describes some of these stability-seeking mechanisms and highlights their highly valuable impact for West African stability. Despite the weakness of the state, these mechanisms have so far successfully prevented community clashes and continue to play a virtuous role in protecting the two countries against inter-religious violence.

The mechanisms have limited the establishment of radical organizations in both national territories, as well as the enrolment of young nationals into the armed groups. The report goes on to state that together with the growing domestic tensions (including economic crises and demographic strains), the multiplying external religious threats (mostly from Boko Haram) now question the solidity of these endogenous tools and, in the context of these tensions, the ability of the African states to address effectively the destabilizing trends at play.

The report therefore concludes with a set of recommendations that encourages *early action* as a follow-up to the *early warning* included in this report.

Introduction

Methodology, objective and structure of the report

Crises in the Sahel (from Mali to southern Tunisia and Libya) and the regionalization of Boko Haram's conflict to the Lake Chad basin (Niger, Cameroon and Chad) are some of today's worrying signals related to West African stability. The question of a potential broadening of this 'arc of crisis' to stable countries in the region, including Benin and Ghana, motivated research in the field conducted by the Clingendael Institute.

The main purpose of this research was to look into the (potential) tensions between religious denominations in the West African region, especially since these divides, in West Africa, traditionally coincide with geographic divides and socio-economic differences. The research team looked into historic, political and societal dynamics that may constitute elements of future instability. The underlying assumption was that the processes behind radicalization and identity-driven conflicts (for example, in Niger, Chad, Mali, Nigeria and Cameroon) may also take root in neighbouring states because of historic, political and socio-economic similarities.

In Accra and Tamalé (Ghana), and in Cotonou and Porto-Novo (Benin), the research team met with a wide variety of interlocutors from the public and private sectors. They collected qualitative data that is likely to help the general understanding on sub-Saharan emerging trends and identified factors that could be an indication of future tensions in the region.

Interviews were held in both Ghana and Benin with labour unions, students, journalists, border policemen, Western and regional embassies, political and traditional leaders and religious groups from all affiliations. The interviews focused on stability crossroads and stressful events in Benin (such as the upcoming presidential elections in February 2016 and political support to the anti-Boko Haram coalition) and Ghana (for example, the elections in November 2016) that could generate community or inter-/intra-religious tensions.

This Clingendael Report looks at elements related to identity and religion and how they intertwine with national and local politics in Ghana and Benin. All of these elements have the potential to create societal divisions that may lead from 'us-versus-them thinking' to 'us-versus-them talking' and eventually also to 'us-versus-them acting'. In sub-Saharan Africa, north-south conflicts – as in Nigeria and Mali – partially replaced ethnic-related conflicts, such as the 1994 Rwandan genocide or the post-electoral ethnic violence in Kenya in 2007. These geographic divides, whether real, perceived or

manipulated, can be exploited by actors to create tensions, whenever and wherever these actors feel that this is in their political interest. Along with the potential societal divisions, or factors, this Clingendael Report therefore also looks at the societal actors that may engage in identity politics and seek to sharpen divides, rather than to ease them.

Societies may also develop their own systems to manage divisions and conflicts, so these conflict-management tools also deserve specific attention in this report. Existing and local conflict-management mechanisms can reduce potential tensions, as well as neutralize the societal factors and actors that encourage divisions and violence. These mechanisms are often historically rooted and culture-specific. This is why the research team tried, in the short time that was available, to look at the specific and cultural ways that the Ghanaian and Beninese actors are dealing with politics, identity and societal stress. The underlying question is whether these endogenous mechanisms are strong enough to keep the emerging identity-related societal divisions under control, more specifically since external actors are increasingly influencing the scene and spill-over from nearby conflicts is around the corner.

This Clingendael Report emphasizes the present and forthcoming ingredients that could endanger stability in two countries that have so far not been affected by instability or the broader regional crises. The reason for the focus on Ghana and Benin is because both countries present the same symptoms of generational contestation and attraction to religious fanatics. In both countries, traditional leaders, and the elders in general, are increasingly challenged in their role as natural and accepted key players. The limitations of public means that are available also make the political leaders unable to reverse the attraction of religious radical preachers for the youngest and most vulnerable cohorts (namely, unemployed, peripheral and/or illiterate youth). If not directly addressed in situ as a core element of the field research, the region's military and security forces are most probably challenged with the same type of issues. While no concrete element indicates a growing religiosity or radicalism within these corps for now, they belong to their environment and directly interact with it. As emphasized elsewhere in the region (Guinea in 2008, Niger in 2010, Mali in 2012 and Burkina Faso in 2014), the military forces are tied up with corporatist tensions that – even when not directly instrumentalized by religious leaders or outside influences – could degenerate into future tensions (with the elders' legitimacy questioned by younger military, lack of means and growing frustration towards the multiple current threats, and corporatist distrust of the traditional/political authorities, etc.). With various and often insufficient means, Benin and Ghana, but also others countries in the region (such as Togo or Burkina Faso), are now playing as 'frontliners' against radical contagion in West Africa. A better understanding of the local dynamics at play in these 'so far stable' countries, and of the 'under-state' actors and factors (that is, from civil and religious societies) that can act as a counter-balance to the negative effects of all the foreign influences, is more necessary than ever to pave the way towards long-standing stability in the region.

The Challenges for Future Stability in Ghana and Benin: Reports from Field Research

No two countries are the same, and the populations' composition is unique in the West African nations. However, the fact that the (originally) nomadic populations in the northern area – ranging all the way from Mauritania to Chad – have much in common and share many characteristics in terms of language and life style should also be considered. To a certain extent, a similar reality exists in the band south of the geographic space, traditionally reserved for cattle herding and the traders of the Sahel. Here, farming dominates as an economic basis, and Christianity, imported by the missionaries, prevails. This rough sketch of the 'west to east' human architecture of West Africa is related to natural conditions, such as vegetation and rainfall, but is not at all reflected in the geographic architecture. On the contrary, in fact, for the national borders run from north to south. This means that what would logically be united is divided into artificial national units. It is this unpleasant remnant of the past that creates artificial 'north-south' divides in all the West African national units, to a varying degree. The mixture of political, religious, life style, language, socio-economic and identity topics that result from this division may give (and has given) rise to instability in some countries in the region. The scoping mission for this project tried to assess the potential for more terrorism or terrorist groups similar to those that are active in Mali and Nigeria. The aim is not only to assess the potential for such groups, but also to suggest options for early prevention in Ghana, Benin and other countries in the region.

The focus was on the potential for inter-religious tensions, more specifically in Ghana, where both Muslim and Catholic contacts warned of extremist Christian elements who are invading public space and gaining momentum in the country.¹ The assumption was that this could have a negative impact on the still relatively stable and peaceful relations between Christian and Muslim communities. The potential for future confrontations between those groups exists in Ghana. Incidents have already occurred here (for example, the Ghanaian National Peace Council has had to intervene on several occasions to arbitrate tensions regarding radical preachers or anti-Muslim sermons). During the field research, however, it became clear that the intra-faith differences and competition among multiple affiliations of the same religion are far more relevant as a potential source of (future) tensions than inter-faith clashes. In both Ghana and Benin, the Muslim community appears to be far more internally divided than the Christian community, and intra-Muslim antagonisms seem to be more stressful for societal stability in the long run. The intra-faith competition among Muslim groups is highly influenced by outside forces that seek to gain access to Muslim communities.²

1 Interviews conducted in both Accra and Tamale.

2 For example, Turkish activism in Accra, where Turkey is financing the building of an immense mosque, is for instance in competition with Saudi Arabian activism outside the capital, with Saudi Arabia directly supporting the building of mosques and welcoming local Muslim students to Medina for training courses. Information collected during interviews conducted in Ghana and Benin.

1 Report on the Situation in, and Specifics of, Ghana

Pre- and Post-Colonial Remnants

Before independence, the colonial rulers empowered local chieftains and Sufi religious leadership to extend their political influence. Like anywhere else in West Africa, the Sufi interpretation of Islam represents a mixture of local original religion (animist cults) and imported Islam from Arab origins.³ This syncretism came under pressure, even before independence, because of its perceived 'religious impurity' and its relationship with the repressive colonial powers. With the wave of independence aspirations in Africa, which had strong roots in Ghana, the opposition to the Sufi interpretation of Islamic teachings was even more politicized.⁴

In 2015, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) party, which carries the heritage of Kwame Nkrumah (independent Ghana's first prime minister and president from 1957 to the 1966 military coup), still finds more traction among non-Sufi (orthodox) Muslims, where the oppositional New Patriotic Party (NPP) has more support in the traditional, or Sufi, Muslim groups. Contrary to the 'democratically more popular' NDC party, the 'elitist' NPP tries to manage an internal religious equilibrium (for example, there has been a Muslim vice-president for eight years), even if this does not translate into votes, for now at least. The difficulty for the NPP in mobilizing the working class, and extending its influence at the national level (that is, outside its ethnic Akan stronghold), represent two main obstacles for the party's electoral success so far.

A vast majority of Christians (Orthodox, Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian) support the NPP, whereas the new Christian Charismatic worshippers are more inclined to vote for the NDC. The Christian faith (also imported) seems to have escaped the post-colonial effect that has affected the Sufi religion because of its support of colonial rule. The

3 See, for instance, Ki-Zerbo, J. and Niane, D.T. (eds), *Histoire Générale de l'Afrique, tome IV, 'L'Afrique du XII^e au XVI^e siècle'* (Paris: Présence Africaine, Edicef, Unesco, 1991), p. 321. The authors describe well the diffusion of Islam in West African societies and the relative absence of conflicts with local communities and existing ancestral/animist cults. Muslim propagators never fought these local grounds by encouraging syncretism and a common mix between ancestral cults and new cultural inputs.

4 Private communications with the Institute for Democratic Governance, Accra (14 October 2015). For more details, see also Dieterlen G., Sylla D. and Soumare, M., *L'Empire du Ghana: Le Wagadou et les traditions de Yérére* (Paris: Karthala, 1992); and Ki-Zerbo and Niane (eds), *Histoire Générale de l'Afrique, tome IV*.

orthodox Christian churches in Ghana took the side of nationalism and opposition to colonialism, and supported Nkrumah and his liberation movement, when they felt that the time was right.

The Political Field in Ghana

The independence struggle in the 1960s deeply shaped the Ghanaian political field around two main ideological tendencies: Nkrumah and the Convention People's Party (CPP), supported by a vast majority of the population, and which advocated for immediate emancipation from the British colonizer; and the upper-middle class and the Christian clergy on the other hand, which were more inclined to support the implementation of a gradual and step-by-step independence process. According to most interviewees in Accra, these old lines still structure today's political arena, with the successor to Nkrumah's CPP, the NDC, and the NPP, whose political audience still attracts the middle class of Ghanaian society.⁵ As pointed out by one contact, the 'vote in Ghana relies on history and money'.

While religious affiliations do not seem to play a role in the structure of the Ghanaian vote, community origins and ethnic factors appear to play a great role in political mobilization. 'Big men' and regional strongholds explain the orientation of votes in the country and the larger influence of the NDC across the territory still results in its political predominance, whereas the NPP's Akan base today strongly limits its nation-wide audience. Geographic affiliation has so far prevented religious-oriented turmoil and the political instrumentalization of apparent Muslim marginalization at a national level (there are presently only one Muslim minister and five members of parliament (MPs), and Muslims are under-represented within the higher ranks of the defence hierarchy, with the notable exception of the police force, which is headed by a Muslim).⁶

The North–South Equation in Ghana

The popular narrative and perception among the population is that Ghana is strongly divided into the north and the south. The southern region is relatively rich and geographic isolation is said to play a role in the northern region's economic backwardness. This has been translated into the need for a balanced political representation in government and otherwise. For instance, Ghana's present day

5 See also Salihi, N. and Aning, K., 'Do Institutions Matter? Managing Institutional Diversity and Change in Ghana's Fourth Republic', Policy Brief 10, Kofi Annan International Peace Keeping Center (2013), pp. 3 and following.

6 Private communication with the Office of the National Chief Imam, Accra (12 October 2015).

president, John Dramani Mahama, is from the 'north', a fact that is known and relevant for the political balance in the country. Yet unlike what one would expect, he is not a Muslim. In Ghana, a significant slice of the population in the geographic north is Christian. There are different interpretations of the historic whereabouts of these people. The fact is that the mixture of the two groups in the northern part of Ghana has not led to major tensions. Although there have been some incidents lately, the field research and interviews conducted highlighted the reciprocal tolerance existing between Christians and Muslims in northern Ghana.

The Role of Religion

Ghana is, however, a religious war zone in a different sense. Religion is hard to escape; the visitor to Ghana will find him or herself confronted with preachers, churches, loudspeakers, bill boards, flyers and other signs of religious institutions, all trying to win hearts, minds and, most of all, souls. This takes the form of intimidating actions on some occasions and is intruding at the very least. Competition, especially in urban areas, is fierce and public. While 'space' is obviously limited, political support appears as a 'fast-track' option to enlarge an audience. The representatives of churches and religions are then trying to win as many politicians for their specific affiliation in different ways. Representing big numbers of voters is an argument that is used to gain access to the government's inner circles and policies. In other words, it works both ways: winning hearts, minds and souls gives leverage and access to a privileged circle; access raises status and influence, and wins hearts and minds. Many mingle in this race. Newcomers like the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, the Orthodox Christian churches and Orthodox Islam are all supposed to be ideologically and financially supported by outside sponsors (such as the US Charismatic churches for their Ghanaian counterparts, Turkey for the building of the mosque in Accra, Saudi Arabia for local mosques and training, Pakistan for the Tabliq worshippers, and Egypt for training). Except for Turkey, whose government makes its support very public, other countries generally favour a more discrete cooperation, particularly via religious associations or charitable non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are active in the field.

Religious and Political Relations

Even though they are sometimes publically discrete, religious and political relations are intense in Ghana. One must be affiliated with a religion and, even though it is not loudly claimed, politicians refer to this 'identity' as a support base for the elections. At the same time, the Ghanaian government must pay well-balanced attention to all religions and groups that could represent a certain constituency (approximately 70 per cent Christian and 20 per cent Muslim). This is a balancing act that seems to work at present. Yet the balance is fragile (between the Christians and the Muslims, but, more importantly, within

the Christian camp, between Catholic and evangelist influences, and within the Muslims, between the Sufi and the Sunni factions), and the battle is still ongoing. It is yet to be seen whether and to what extent the balance will hold, and this will largely depend on some of the developments that influence Ghana from outside. Ghana is far from immune to developments in the region and in the Middle East. As well highlighted by the Turkish-funded building of a replica of the Istanbul mosque in Accra, these foreign influences are powerful, and sometimes very dominant and visible. Islamic vitality in the country is strong and is spreading, as notably illustrated in Tamalé with the Ambariya Sunni community and their holistic activities with local populations (such as an Islamic school and Arabic literacy courses for adults, which seek to expand to social activities). Although the number of recruits for armed groups and terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is now very limited (with only two cases officially reported by Ghana's Ministry of the Interior), the potential is supposed to be bigger, especially among the majority of unemployed youth from both urban and rural regions, especially the northernmost remote areas.

Urbanization in Ghana

Ghana is experiencing drastic societal transformation because of urbanization. The coastal region is attractive to many youths, mostly males, who seem less inclined to work on their parents' farms and have thus decided to quit poverty for an uncertain, yet urban, future. Accra is booming and expanding rapidly. It is a vibrant and dynamic city, but this comes at a price, like anywhere else. 'Imported' peripheral communities, which are mainly the Muslim northern ones, seem less successful at coping with the challenges of urban life. They are poverty-stricken and seem unable to organize service-delivery systems for the average community member, unlike the Christians. Prospects for Muslim youths are poor. In Accra, it seems that identity is closely related to religion. While clear data are not available, shared perceptions insist on the little – or the absence of – knowledge of the young Muslim cohorts, who then may search on the internet (which is readily available in Accra) for guidance. For non-literate youth (estimated at 15 per cent of Ghanaian youths between 15 and 24), mosques or 'Islamic' acquaintances become primary references. All of the ingredients are present for radical elements to approach some of these youngsters. Warnings reached the researchers from a number of interviewed contacts, and are especially related to the growing number of mosques with unknown backgrounds and the potential risks for foreign recruitment.

Identity in Ghana

As already mentioned, the average Ghanaian will publically identify with his or her community. However, while all of the interviewees emphasized their ethnic group as their primary identity, the very public notoriety of influential leaders' religious affiliations, and

the articulation in all of their accounts of religion, illustrate the importance played by non-ethnic factors in Ghanaian society. Group cohesion and social glue appear, in fact, to come from the religious groups. Ethnicity and community factors follow immediately after, but are more generally presented as predominant in the public sphere. Mingled throughout, there is the north-south divide that was mentioned above. However, without it being a very conscious phenomenon, Ghana is more of a nation than many of the other countries in West Africa. Many Ghanaians refer to themselves as being *Ghanaian*, much more citizens of their nation than the people in neighbouring countries. This may be because of the language barrier in neighbouring nations, but it is definitely an underestimated strength of the Ghanaian nation.

Conflict-Management Mechanisms

Another strength of Ghana is its conflict-management system. At the national level, the National Peace Council, which is composed of traditional chiefs, religious leaders and some 'major players' from the academic and political domains (elders, mainly), is presently functional and manages to resolve tensions effectively. On the religious issues, the Inter-faith Religious Group is referred to by many, if not all, of the actors as an operative tool to regulate possible tensions and to prevent inter-religious conflict in Ghana. The National Peace Council gathers the main religious representative structures in the country (that is, *inter alia*, the Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Christian National Council, the Pentecostal and Charismatic Council, the National Association of Charismatic Churches, the Ambariya community, the orthodox Muslim groups Al-Sunna and Tijaniyya, and the National House of Chiefs). The system also works at a local level, through community initiatives and individual religious leaders who seek consensus and resolution for tensions.

Although corruption is widespread in Ghana,⁷ the formal legal system seems for the moment to be effectively replaced by 'under-state' consensus-seeking religious leaders. Actors who were interviewed in Ghana generally insisted on the constant dialogue that exists between religious leaders, generally outside the official and governmental channels. The office of the national chief imam praised the friendship and trustful relationships with the Ghanaian archbishopric, pointing, for instance, to the Catholics' support for the electrification of the imam's office.⁸ All of the other actors with whom the Clingendael Institute met also admitted regular, and even constant, contacts with

7 As was recently highlighted by the exposure of corruption in the legal system by the investigative reporter Anas Aremeyaw Anas; see <https://insightwi.com/anas> (accessed 12 November 2015).

8 Interviews conducted with the Office of the National Chief Imam, Accra (12 October 2015).

their religious counterparts.⁹ In the absence of a functioning formal legal system, this *modus operandi* may seem a delicate and vulnerable solution in the long run. For now, however, Ghanaians are confident of the efficiency of this informal parallel system. It is obvious that this success will largely depend on the goodwill of a relatively small number of individuals. It may survive a crisis, but procedures are not very well described, and in future complex situations, it may very well prove to be too fragile to absorb a ‘shock’ effectively. The succession of some religious or traditional leaders is, for instance, one of today’s major points of concern that could indeed trigger tensions among groups. The National Chief Imam, Sheikh Dr Osman Nuhu Sharubutu, who is 92 years old, appears to be a central point of preoccupation for Sufi Muslims in Ghana, since his succession could precipitate intra-Islamic tensions in the country, especially between the Sufi and the Sunni communities.

The Education Policies

One of the factors mentioned by many in Ghana as part of the ‘secret’ of the relative success of the social fabric is Ghana’s educational system. Based on secularity and multi-confessional affiliation, the Ghanaian educative system is commonly presented as a major formula for stability in the country. It was designed so that youths would be confronted with diversity and so that it would include people of different backgrounds into one common system. It is based on secular, government-funded education for all and is performed by public and religious institutions with no distinction, with an obligation for them to accept every scholar and not to dispense proselytizing activities during weekdays. Similarly, all religious holidays in Ghana (from Christmas to Eid al-Fitr) are included in the national holiday system and have to be respected by all schools with no distinction for religion. This system, however, has recently led to incidents and tensions, such as in February 2015 when Muslim girls were forbidden to wear veils in school and had to appeal formally for the government’s intervention.¹⁰ After national protests, public authorities finally decided to allow the wearing of veils at school, but this incident illustrated the latent inter-religious tensions at play in Ghana.

Besides this formal system, some religious institutions decided to ‘liberate’ themselves from the Ghanaian state, and to cater for religious education only. The Ambariya Sunni institution in Tamale is a clear illustration of this: with 3,400 Muslim pupils and 140 teachers, it has preaching activities every day of the week.¹¹ These local exceptions do

9 Interviews conducted in Accra with the Office of the National Chief Imam, the Church of Pentecost, the Pentecostal and Charismatic Council, the Pentecostal Council and the Muslim Students’ Association.

10 See, for instance, <http://vibeghana.com/2015/02/21/muslims-protest-against-violation-of-their-rights/> (accessed 12 November 2015). Confirmed by several interviews conducted in Accra and Tamale (between 12 and 16 October 2015).

11 Private communication with an Ambariya representative, Tamale (15 October 2015).

not, for now, question the national Ghanaian government's curriculum, but are a strong and clear signal of the existing religious pressures at play. These parallel educational institutions moreover show a certain resemblance to the early stages of Boko Haram in Nigeria.

The Emancipation of a Religion

The inclusive educational policies of Ghana have 'forced' the Muslims in the north to accept mixing with Christians. This has also led to the emancipation of the group. In Ghana, one can find stickers that read 'proud to be a Muslim'. There is apparently a reason to doubt whether one should be proud to be a Muslim. This emancipation has led to more awareness of the identity, as well as of the rights that come with the identity. It also comes with a certain level of militancy when it comes to the position of the religion in Ghana, its political influence and connectivity, especially with the central redistributive circuits. This militancy fits into the agenda of some outside actors, who encourage its growth and the *Dawa*-related activities (mainly preaching).¹² In that sense, this new wave of emancipation has entered the war zone mentioned earlier. According to many of the Muslim contacts interviewed, both in Accra and Tamale, it is still early days and these militant circles may develop into bigger and more demanding movements, especially with the growing economic frustration and the well-funded ideological alternative offered. Yet Ghana may also be able to accommodate these groups and strike the right balance between inclusion and its tendency to create parallel structures outside mainstream society.

Diversity in Islam in Ghana

As already mentioned, Ghana originally blended African religion with imported Arab Islam. This is generally referred to as the Sufi tradition. This phenomenon is not only happening in Ghana, but has been observed all over the West African region. Opposition to the Sufi syncretism, which is considered impure by the Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia, came from the Gulf itself. Ghanaian scholars were invited to Medina in Saudi Arabia to study Islam and returned to preach the 'new' doctrine.¹³ This imported movement is now known by the name of Al-Sunna. In Ghana, it is embodied by the Sunni camp.

12 *Dawa* refers to the propagation of radical Islamic ideology. Because of their economic (such as financial assistance to Muslim communities, or aid for building the mosques) or ideological support (religious training), foreign countries have succeeded in developing their influence in the whole of the West African region. In Ghana, Middle Eastern religious influences are expanding, to the detriment of local Sufi Islam.

13 Private communication with the Office of the National Chief Imam, Ghana (12 October 2015). Confirmed during an interview conducted in Tamale with one prominent member of the Ambariya community (15 October 2015).

It is strong in terms of numbers (around 80 per cent of Ghanaian Muslims according to a Sunni source in Tamale) and its leaders are presently developing a concrete expansionist strategy. Thanks to several encouraging factors (including Saudi support, *delegitimization* of the traditional local figures and a 'complete and ready for service' alternative identity), the Al-Sunna movement has the ambition to deliver social services to the community and to raise political support for its pure interpretation of Islam. Backed by a new generation of preachers, it now sends scholars to Saudi Arabia and is accredited to universities in the Gulf. Their Tamale stronghold today represents the base for their future extension, with tensions expected with the traditional Sufi hierarchies, including the National Chief Imam.

Last but not least, Ghanaian Muslims also reckon with a militant and yet non-violent group called Tablighi Jammāt (or Tabliq).¹⁴ These worshippers are ideologically trained and inspired by Pakistani preachers, with outside retreats as a core element to their identity. Their number is still limited in Ghana, even if they have an 'office' in Lamashegu (a Tamale suburb), but they are known to be present all over the West African region.¹⁵ According to one Ambariya source, their members mainly originate from the Sunni community.

Similarly, there are reports of Iranian-trained and -inspired groups that seek to educate the young in the Shiite interpretation of Islam. It is obvious that the growth of the Al-Sunna influence in Ghana has not gone unnoticed.

The Potential for Recruitment and Hotbeds of Radicalism

There are a number of potential hotbeds for radicalism and the recruitment of violent actors in Ghana. All three of them are mentioned above. To sum them up, here are the places and populations at risk:

1. Urban Muslim neighbourhoods and marginalized communities, especially the highly populated areas (these communities are referred to as '*Zongo*' in Ghana);
2. The Al-Sunna movement, which is potentially growing more militant and looking for expansion of its activities;
3. The growing number of *Muballighin* (Tabliq worshippers) in northern Ghana, who may gain momentum under external or internal pressure.

14 For more details, see Masud, K. (ed.), *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jama'at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 121–138 in particular.

15 In northern Mali, one of their most prominent representatives is Iyad ag Ghali, the head of the terrorist movement Ansar Dine.

2 Report on the Situation in, and Specifics of, Benin

Pre- and Post-Colonial Remnants

Like in Ghana, the colonial rulers empowered local kings, chieftains and the (Sufi) religious leadership in Benin, in order to extend their own colonial political influence. The political establishment today still shows the impact and traces of that era. A small ruling class takes the political decisions and dominates the realities of governance. By extension, this elite also controls the distributive circuits and the most lucrative economic sectors. Many members of this ruling elite were educated in European educational institutions, especially in France, and share the same background. They have developed a close proximity and know each other quite well. *'We know where to find one another when decisions need to be taken or a crisis needs to be solved'* is an expression that is often and openly used by members of the ruling class in Benin. This small group of elites runs the country like a private company, with high concern for the protection of their own interests. Making (big) profits (especially for the 'political managers') is their final objective. In this sense, Benin is not very exceptional, compared to other (West) African countries.

Still, there are also some striking typically *'Beninois'* characteristics. One of the most important is that, more than in other African countries, the local or indigenous religions were preserved and openly mixed with the imported Islamic and Christian teachings and, more importantly, practices.¹⁶ For instance, the Yoruba community (which is one of the main groups in Benin) was the first to translate the Bible into the vernacular language. This Bible includes names of Yoruba's divinities, which are included in the Christian religious descriptions of God. According to several interviewees, *'there are in Benin 40 per cent Muslims, 60 per cent Christians and 110 per cent animists'*. This reflects the existence of a common cultural ground and a real national belief structure. In Benin, the past and present are blended into a unique mixture that has very practical value in everyday life. Religion in Benin is 'aggregative' and contains a helpful recipe for facing crises, preventing disorder, and curing disease and discomfort. This puts the average citizens of Benin in contact with their own past and culture, allowing them to build their own identity onto a long historic perspective. It offers much more than simply a religion.

16 Private communication with the *Laboratoire d'Analyse Régionale et d'Expertise Sociale*, Cotonou (20 October 2015). For more details, see Constantin, F. and Coulon, C. (eds), *Religion et transition démocratique en Afrique* (Paris: Karthala, 1997).

This does not remove the fact that – like in other countries in Africa – Christianity (or Christians) is (are) associated with the unpleasant, suppressive colonial powers, and this fact still holds important political relevance. On the other hand, the very positive role played by the late Beninese Archbishop Monseigneur Isidore de Souza during the 1990 National Conference¹⁷ gives Christianity a special place in the country and also made Benin an interesting case study for Vatican diplomacy in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁸

Another typical characteristic of Benin is the high level of mistrust among individuals. Interviewees related this to the long history of slavery and the fact that during the period of the slave trade, people would literally sell their enemies, or even an unpleasant brother or sister. Others explained this individualism as rooted in Benin's political instability and successive crises between 1963 and 1970. This is supposed to have encouraged the development of individual 'ingenuity' systems among the population. Whatever the case, 'never trust anyone' has become a motto in Benin's society. Wealth is envied and could degenerate into jealousy. There are numerous stories of poisoning among members of the same family. Brothers or sisters hardly share the same plate and rarely invite one another into each other's homes. This mistrust is strengthened by occult practices, including voodoo, and is related to the proliferation of highly secretive groups such as the Freemasons or the *Rose-Croix*. It gives a certain lack of social glue and a reluctance to cooperate with others. There is certainly a high level of individualism in Benin, which does not exist in other West African societies.

The growth of new 'players' in the religious scene can be explained by these characteristics. These new churches promise a quick fix for individual problems. At the same time, they raise considerable income for its leadership. This fits well with the way in which politics and religion are combined in Benin. Benin's current President Thomas Boni Yayi's conversion from Islam to Evangelical Protestantism¹⁹ and the present-day influence of this religious movement on Beninese politics are obvious illustrations of this intertwining.

17 De Souza was the head of the first West African National Conference, which was held in Benin in 1990 (and subsequently in most French-speaking West African countries). This conference aimed to negotiate the democratic opening of Benin and to legalize a multi-party system. De Souza's moderating role has been presented (and still is) as one major element for the success of the National Conference.

18 For a brief overview, see Banegas, R., 'Benin: Challenges for Democracy', *African Affairs*, 113/452 (July 2014), pp. 449–459. For more details on Benin's political trajectory, see Banegas, R., *La démocratie a pas de caméléon : Transitions et imaginaires politiques au Bénin* (Paris : Karthala, 2003).

19 The exact date of his conversion is unknown, but went back to his presidency of the West African Bank for Development in Togo between 1994 and 2006.

The Political Field in Benin

Benin's present-day political landscape is scattered. There are many (over 200) different political parties. The Cowry Forces for an Emerging Benin (*Forces Cauris pour un Bénin Emergent* in French, or FCBE), which is the current presidential coalition, gathers more than 100 different parties. Together with the Democratic Renewal Party (*Parti du renouveau démocratique*, or PRD), which is led by the president of the National Assembly and the Union Makes the Nation party (*L'Union fait la Nation*, or UN), they occupy most of the public space. These parties obviously are not based on deferring ideologies. Indeed, on the contrary. Like in other West African countries, politics in Benin is based on personal interests ('mailbox political parties') and is about patronage and serving clients, predominantly from the politician's native region. Community orientation of the vote is very strong, as emphasized by one of the most influential local kings interviewed during the research, who openly explained how politicians would come to his office before elections and 'ask' for the votes in his kingdom.²⁰ This system requires a high level of 'give and take' and creates interdependence and a certain level of (re) distribution of wealth. The stability that results is delicate, however, and may fail in times of economic scarcity or other societal stress, also because, as will be indicated later, this system does not accommodate all of the societal actors in Benin.²¹

Since Benin's society is strongly organized along religious affiliations, religious leaders seek to extend their political influence on different levels. Ties with political parties and ministers are strong, and church leaders belong to the small elite group that runs the country. Historically, the influence of the classic Christian churches has been strong, but was always associated with colonialism. Some of this has changed with the conversion of Benin's present president to Evangelical Protestantism. This fact has further extended the influence of the newcomer, the Evangelic church, at the highest level of government. Benin's Ministry of the Interior and all of the presidential advisors are Evangelists, a fact that has impacted the relations between different societal actors and the balance of power in Cotonou and Porto-Novo. The classic, traditional elite is confronted with reduced access to a number of high-ranking politicians. This represents a rupture in the straight line that one can draw from the colonial power to the present (with only one interruption during former President Mathieu Kérékou's Marxist-Leninist period between 1975 and 1980).

It is important to note that the Evangelical churches have strong backing from private sources, especially in the United States, and that they represent a new player/power in

20 Interview conducted in Porto-Novo (21 October 2015).

21 For more specific details on Benin's political life, please refer to Engels, J.N., Stroh, A. and Wantchékon, L. (eds), *Le fonctionnement des partis politiques au Bénin* (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2008), available online at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/benin/05207.pdf>.

sub-Saharan Africa.²² According to one source, US actions in the coastal African region can be understood in the light of the strategic importance taken by the Gulf of Guinea for American oil supply five years ago.²³ Before the beginning of the exploitation of US shale gas resources, the American government indeed had the ambition to import 25 per cent of US energy needs from this African region. The growing development of Evangelist movements would have been concomitant to this strategy. Even though the real motives for the funding of the Evangelical churches is quite different, the fact that these conspiracy-theory-like explanations float in Benin is indicative of the damage and confusion that the religious newcomers are creating. The messaging during sermons in these new churches is even more worrisome, since they advocate intolerance towards other religions, and more specifically Islam.

It is equally important to note that, traditionally, the influence of imams in national politics is, and always has been, limited. Islam was a power in the north, influenced by Arabs, and had its own dynamics and constituency, with little relevance in the high politics of Benin's coastal areas. Some of the basic values of solidarity, justice and pride that dominate discourse in Islam do not necessarily resonate with the rest of Benin's population. Islam is tolerated in Benin, but is not integrated into the national political landscape. With only one Muslim national political leader – Abdoulaye Bio Tchane from the *L'alliance Avenir pour un Bénin triomphant* (ABT political alliance) – Benin remains largely Christian-dominated. Combined with growing (and sometimes destabilizing) foreign interference on both the Christian and Muslim sides, and parallel to the increasingly intolerant religious discourse in Benin, this low visibility by Muslims may lead to tensions in the future (because of resentment at their marginalization, and political or economic frustration).

22 For an overview, see Strandsbjerg, C., 'Les nouveaux réseaux évangéliques et l'Etat : le cas du Bénin', in Fourchard, L., Mary, A. and Otayek, R., *Entreprises religieuses transnationales en Afrique de l'Ouest* (Paris, IFRA-Karthala, 2005), pp. 223–242. For a more regional overview, see Dorier-Apprill, E. and Ziaoula, R.E., 'La diffusion de la culture évangélique en Afrique centrale : Théologie, éthique, et réseaux', in *Herodote*, no. 119 (4th trimester 2005), pp. 129–156.

23 Interview conducted in Cotonou with the *Laboratoire d'Analyse Régionale et d'Expertise Sociale* (20 October 2015).

The North–South Equation in Benin

Like in Ghana, there is a strong, or at least perceived, ‘north–south’ divide in Benin. The recent dispute over a national customs’ service entry exam and the alleged preference for northern candidates is a strong illustration of this still-existing north–south divide.²⁴

The north of Benin continues to be poor and less developed, where the south holds the economic power. Colonial penetration from the coasts led to north–south ‘development’ disparities. Because of southern divisions (especially Abomey, Porto-Novo and Mono), politicians often originate from the northern part of the country. This operative equilibrium between the north (holding political power) and the south (which has social and economic influence) has so far succeeded in fostering national unity and in preserving peaceful relationships among Benin’s communities.

Both Mathieu Kérékou (president of Benin from 1972–1991 and from 1996–2006) and Thomas Boni Yayi (the current head of state since 2006) are from the north. Most northerners are Christians, descendants of those who were sent by colonial powers to guarantee tax collection and governance. Therefore, much like in Ghana, the north–south divide does no longer necessarily reflect a clear religious divide between Muslims and Christians. Nevertheless, there is a relevant level of minority complexity within the northern population. The southern region economically dominates the country, based on the history of colonial arrival and settling, yet northerners compensate for this socio–psychological phenomenon through inter-marriage and material welfare.²⁵ Meanwhile, however, the leadership of the mostly northern-based Muslim population feels discriminated against and humiliated by the mostly Christian ruling class. A certain level of collective exclusion is certainly present within the Muslim population, and calls for a Muslim president are increasing and becoming more audible.²⁶ These demands are based on the factual lower political representation, lower living standards and economic development indicators in Benin’s northern region. However, while inter-marriage and northern political control are supposed to counter-balance the regional inequalities,

24 The government of Benin recently organized a customs’ service entry exam. Northerners alleged over-representations among the laureates fed suspicion and hostile reactions in Cotonou and Porto-Novo. Several interviewees referred to this exam as an illustration of the still-existing tensions between north and south in Benin. From private communication with religious representatives in Cotonou (21 and 22 October 2015).

25 On this religious ‘mix’, see Mayrargue, C., ‘*Les christianismes contemporains au Bénin au défi de la pluralization : Dynamiques d’expansion et porosité religieuse*’, *Afrique contemporaine*, no. 252 (2003), p. 92. See also Barbier, J.C. and Dorier-Apprill, E., ‘*Cohabitations et concurrences religieuses dans le golfe de Guinée. Le sud-Bénin, entre vodun, islam et christianismes*’, in Pourtier, R. (org.), *Colloque Géopolitiques africaines : Bulletin de l’association des géographes français* (June 2002), pp. 223–236.

26 Interview conducted with a Muslim notable in Porto-Novo (21 October 2015).

other sources emphasize the growing importance of the religious factor and the possible role that this new ideological vitality could play in Benin's future stability ('tribalism is not a problem anymore, but with religion, the register is more passionate').²⁷

Inter-Religious Relations

Although there is a claim that relations among Benin's religions can be described as 'tolerant', much of this tolerance disappears with a slight scratch of a nail. There is an anti-Islamic discourse present in different Christian churches and sermons, on both the Catholic and Evangelist sides. Muslim interviewees in Cotonou, for instance, referred to some pastors' interdiction not to eat meat from the Muslim feast of sacrifice (*Tabaski*), because eating *Tabaski* meat would hold the risk of becoming poor. The anti-Muslim discourse more generally highlights the assumed ambition of Islam to convert Christians to Muslims, as well as the ambition of Muslims to dominate politics. The researchers were warned, on several occasions, by Christian church leaders about the potential for a Sharia law-based state in Benin.²⁸ The anti-tolerant discourse of the Evangelist churches is wider and targets not only Muslims, but also classical Christian churches.

On the other hand, the more tolerant Sufi interpretation of Islam is being challenged by more purist imported versions. The number of mosques that are being built and the introduction of the veil for girls and women in the north, especially in the city of Djougou, are recent examples of these fundamentalist pressures. Islamic presence in Benin is old and coincided with the establishment of freedom of association in the 1980s–1990s, which encouraged a proliferation of Islamic charitable NGOs and the dissemination of new foreign doctrines.²⁹ External training for Beninese scholars, especially in Medina in Saudi Arabia, exacerbated these foreign influences. A revival of religious orientation and related *Dawa* is visibly present. According to some sources, police have stepped in on several occasions in the north against young extremist preachers returning from Saudi Arabia. In Cotonou, a radical Muslim cleric from Congo has also recently been expelled. These phenomena are catalysed by the fact that youngsters are travelling to the Middle East to receive training and are sponsored to return to preach a different approach to

27 Interview conducted in Cotonou with the *Laboratoire d'Analyse Régionale et d'Expertise Sociale* (20 October 2015).

28 Interviews conducted in Cotonou with representatives of both the Archbishopric and the *Eglise protestante méthodiste* (22 October 2015).

29 See, for instance, Brégand, D., 'Du soufisme au réformisme : la trajectoire de Mohamed Habib, Imam à Cotonou', *Politique Africaine*, no. 116 (December 2010), pp. 121–141.

Islam that is purer than local traditional or other syncretic influences.³⁰ Some imams are, for instance, reported to earn 300,000 FCFA per month (around 450 euros),³¹ an amount that cannot come exclusively from local worshippers' contributions. Pockets of more purist groups, which are organized around these individuals and which hold a certain societal status based on their studies abroad, form parallel societies, much like those that exist in Ghana. The northern city of Djougou, close to the border with Togo, clearly illustrates this Beninese Islamic revivalism.

While the existence of numerous Islamic schools in Benin could prevent the departure of national scholars to outside the country, it also makes a lot of the contacts who were interviewed by the Clingendael Institute fearful of the potential for the development of home-grown radicalism.

Religious and Political Relations in Benin

The ties between religion and politics in Benin are strong. As indicated above, the (pragmatic) religious affiliation of a politician counts. Moreover, church leaders have an influence over politics and the division of advantages. All classic, established, church leaders have an interest in maintaining the status quo and thus actively seek to preserve the existing power balance. The religious newcomers may be considered (and are considered by some) as spoilers, since they rock the boat. As already described, the political imbalance represented by the change of the current president's affiliation (from Muslim to Evangelist) cannot be overestimated. The upcoming elections in February 2016 could therefore come with high societal tensions.

Muslim representatives and leaders play a less prominent role in the politics of Benin, either because they are less organized or less effective in their political or societal tactics, or because they are not given the space to play a part. Muslim high representatives told the researchers that they were discriminated against by the Beninese government, in terms of political access and economic assistance.³² Contrary to other religions in the country, Beninese Muslims do not receive any public aid, but

30 On these Beninese scholars, see Galilou, A., '*Les diplômés béninois des universités arabo-islamiques : une élite moderne, « déclassée » en quête de légitimité socio-religieuse et politique*', Working Papers, no. 18, Department of Anthropology and African Studies of the Johannes Gutenberg Universität (2003). Clingendael also interviewed the author in Cotonou (21 October 2015).

31 Interview conducted with several representatives of the *Union des Musulmans du Benin*, Cotonou (22 October 2015). The FCFA (or *Franc de la Communauté Financière Africaine*) is the currency used by eight West African nations, including Benin.

32 Interview conducted with several representatives of the *Union des Musulmans du Benin*, Cotonou (22 October 2015).

only in-kind subsidies. They unanimously condemn this political bias. Combined with upcoming purist interpretations of Islam, and the economic situation that prevails in the Muslim communities in the north, this perceived marginalization may constitute the next ingredient for an explosive mixture in the near future. Inter-religious tensions at play in Benin are already high, especially between the Muslims and the new Evangelist groups close to Benin's president. As will be described in the following paragraphs, there are some other factors that may aggravate the situation further.

Urbanization in Benin

The urban areas in Benin are traditionally and historically located in the coastal areas of the country. Like anywhere else in the West African region, the Beninese cities tend to attract youngsters from the rural areas. The economic crisis and alleged opportunities in the south (where the commercial ports are located) have exacerbated these flows. The cities contain a mixture of different nationalities and individuals from different regions and backgrounds.

Identity in Benin

There is a relatively strong identification in Benin with nationality. This is stronger in the cities than beyond. Yet even in rural areas, ethnicity is slowly fading, to be replaced by a sense of belonging to the nation and, of course, to religion. Politics play no visible role in identity. The preservation of local, traditional or indigenous belief systems, as described before, has helped to create a sense of connectivity with the past and therefore with the cultural background of the collective. The importance of local beliefs (such as voodoo) in Beninese society perfectly illustrates this. It may very well be that the common history of suffering during the period of slavery has contributed to this effect as well. However, (modern) religion is, among other factors, also a new dividing line. More assertive and militant approaches to religion are being introduced in Benin through outsiders. This constitutes a challenge for politicians as well as community elders, also because the Muslims, who are under attack from traditional and new Christians, identify themselves with the *Ummah* (pan-Islamic nation) and, more specifically, with their Muslim brothers, who are equally victims of humiliation in, for instance, Palestine and Bosnia.³³

The other dividing line that should not be underestimated is the divide between the youth – and more specifically the urban youth – and the elders. The old elite, who were born and raised before and during the struggle for independence, holds on to power

33 Interviews conducted in Cotonou with imams and religious advisors from the *Mosque Centrale*, Quartier Jacques (22 October 2015).

through the patronage system. The rural youth may still obey today, but the question is what will happen if the urban youth start to demand their share. This is all the more true where the split between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' coincides with the generations, and it is even more likely to provide tension when the 'have nots' are part of the voiceless young generation and are also part of the northern Muslims, who have felt excluded from political power and humiliated and marginalized by Christians since colonial times.

The Conflict-Management Systems

The conflict-resolution systems in Benin are strong, in that these are based on the interest of the elite to keep the system in place and stable. This has little to do with the official legal or political procedures. Like in most other similar countries, however, these formal systems hardly function as a legitimate and effective way to solve conflicts. The governmental delay imposed by the National Assembly in passing the bill to create a formal inter-religious dialogue even raises questions about the political will to regulate the tensions. Moreover, the existing religious consultation framework (especially the Cadre de concertation des confessions religieuses, or Framework for Inter-Faith Consultation and Coordination) appears to be insufficiently inclusive to play a role as a tensions' regulator (for example, Evangelist groups decided not to join). From the traditional leaders' perspective (mainly the kings), the lack of economic support from Benin's government (100 million FCFA a year, or approximately 155,000 euros, for all of the kingdoms) prevents them from playing a virtuous, and globally accepted, role.

The existing conflict-resolution system may be able to fix some of the potential upcoming societal divisions. It may also fail, however, because of the described weaknesses. The possibility of failure cannot be excluded, since the external influences are increasingly relevant, and not just because of the influence of organizations in the United States via the Evangelist networks, and the influence of certain forces in the Gulf via students and preachers who are educated in the Middle East, but more directly by security developments in neighbouring Nigeria. The Nigerian situation is relevant, not just because Benin takes part in the regional coalition against Boko Haram (only at a political level for now, because of the lack of military means available), but also because there are reports about infiltration by, and recruitment for, Boko Haram in Benin. The presence of northern Nigerian imams and Arabic-speaking advisors in the biggest mosque of Benin (in Cotonou city) is one more indication of the interest that Nigerian religious circles have for the situation in Benin.

The Education Policies

Parallel to the public education system, Benin is also characterized by a very high (and a growing) number of Islamic schools, from elementary *madrassa* (religious schools) to university education. While a recent reform significantly limits the possibility for university enrolment, this could lead – according to some sources – to the exclusion of 75 per cent of pupils from the higher education system.³⁴

The co-location of schools and universities in Cotonou and Porto-Novo also represents a regular point of tension between the youth and the Beninese government. Together with massive unemployment (100,000 new graduates each year and no, or very few, absorptive capacities from the public sector),³⁵ these factors could encourage youth mobilization and a violent questioning of current political and economic equilibriums. The youths' exclusion from the legal system and main economic circuits aggravates this frustration and could lead this cohort to being more attracted by alternative influences.

The Emancipation of a Religion

Like in Ghana, Benin's northern region is showing signs of an increasing awareness of Muslim identity. Parallel-society-like groups are emerging and are tolerated for the time being. Although the elite has tried to reduce this influence, all of the indicators show that the stricter interpretation of Islam is on the rise (for example, in the city of Djougou) and is attractive for (some of) the marginalized youth, in urban as well as in the remote rural regions.

Diversity of Islam in Benin

Like in Ghana, the Wahhabi influence is relevant in Benin. This started in the 1970s, based on scholars returning from the Gulf countries and bringing a purist, anti-Sufi interpretation of Islam to the West African region, including to Benin. The reach and impact of Wahhabism is visible and strong today in some areas of Benin, especially in the north. Although the political elite has tried to reduce the impact of these preachers, it seems that of late the relevance of the elders' voices is diminishing. Youths feel attracted to this new promise of perspective and guidance and increasingly ignore the voice of

34 Interview conducted with a high representative of Benin's Ministry of Higher Education and Research, Cotonou (21 October 2015).

35 Interview conducted with a high representative of Benin's Ministry of Higher Education and Research, Cotonou (21 October 2015).

a generation that is losing credibility because of the 'politics of the belly'.³⁶ The lack of (economic) perspective for a new generation provides the last push for youngsters who are seeking a reason to live and die. Like in Ghana, the more aggressive Tabliq doctrine, which is influenced by Pakistanis,³⁷ has also established cells in Benin.

Benin's real difference with Ghana, however, lies in the fact that Benin's individuals are joining the struggle in neighbouring Nigeria. The level and intensity of these recruitments are yet to be established, as well as the real push factors at play (whether economic or ideological attraction), but this recruitment gives a new dimension to Boko Haram's reach, which has always been believed to be restricted to the geographic area around Maiduguri. Apparently, the fact that these foreign fighters – who are joining Boko Haram from Benin – do not speak Kanuri or English does not stop the organization from this recruitment activity outside their normal zone of action. According to the researchers' sources in Benin, the recruitment takes place as a routine activity, but exact numbers are not available.

Another sign of the increasing Nigerian influence in Benin is the presence of Nigerian imams in relevant mosques. It has not gone unnoticed that Islam is under pressure from Christian players in Benin and that reinforcing the 'right' message is important. The exact nature of this message, however, is yet to be seen. Yet the involvement of foreign fighters from Benin in Boko Haram, the *Dawa* of purist interpretations of Islam that is present in the north, and the alienation and lack of economic perspective for the Muslim youth are all ingredients that are presently at hand for a confrontation. The question is whether Benin's traditional elite will be able to respond by giving space to the youth to express their ambitions and perspective, and will facilitate access to resources and politics. The increasing intolerant discourse from the Christian churches suggests, however, that tensions are escalating rather than de-escalating. The researchers were not able to identify the forces that could or would de-escalate these potential developments in the near future.

The Potential for Recruitment and Hotbeds of Radicalism

There are a number of potential hotbeds for radicalism and the recruitment of violent actors in Benin. The lack of security means available at the local level makes highly

36 This expression is from Bayart, J.-F., *L'Etat en Afrique : La politique du ventre* (Paris : Fayard, 1989).

37 For more on the Tabliq and its influences, see the study by Ferdaous Bouhlel Hardy on northern Mali, '*Evolution et dynamique du Tabligh dans le Nord du Mali (1996 2009): entre quête individuelle et moralisation d'une contestation armée*', in Otayek, R. (ed.), *Dimension transnationale de l'islam africain et mutations contemporaines du Sahel : Les Afriques dans le monde*, study for the French Ministry of Defence (March 2011), pp. 177–204.

difficult to properly assess and address the reality of the threats, aggravating the risk of future destabilization. To sum them up, however, here are the places and populations most at risk:

1. Urban, young Muslims who may come under the influence of Nigerians who are presently invading the religious space in Cotonou;
2. External influences in the northern Islamized region of Djougou;
3. Northern, more isolated, Muslim communities that are influenced by more fundamentalist, imported Dawa. There are indications that recruitment for Boko Haram takes place on a routine basis;
4. The Tabliq movement in northern Benin, which seeks more recruits and which may gain momentum under external or internal pressure.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

West Africa at a Crossroads: Growing Intra-Religious Tensions and the Withdrawal of the State

Border porosity, the absence of a regional strategic approach, youths' frustration towards the elders' political and economic monopoly, rural and urban disparities and rampant illiteracy are some of the regional aggravating factors for the spread of extremist ideology and dividing behaviours.

New religious 'ideologies', together with economic frustrations, have deeply impacted the traditional balance and have made long-term stability a challenge for most of the countries in the sub-Saharan region, from Mali to the Horn of Africa. These trends have been emphasized in most of the interviews that were conducted for this research project in both Ghana and Benin. Because of their geographic location, socio-economic balance and the religious competition at play, Ghana and Benin are naturally impacted by these trends.

Contrary to common perceptions and/or existing examples in the West African region, north-south divisions do not systematically endanger national identity, but could accelerate alienation in and between communities, especially in peripheral and neglected areas. Electoral exploitation and sectarian vitality appear to be the main factors for tensions in that context. They exacerbate the divisions between communities and ignite the historic, and sometimes artificial, splits. The self-protecting behaviour and generational ascent of local leaders have weakened their capacity for social control and deprived them from at least part of their influence over portions of the communities, mostly the youth. The appropriation of power and state resources by ageing elites represents one major source of current societal tensions, which could easily degenerate in open violence in the medium term.

The growing Sunni audience in northern Ghana (Tamalé) clearly emphasizes the holistic ambition of some religious organizations, and the challenge – in that context – for public and traditional leaders to impose themselves as natural referents for populations. Growing economic despair provides a fertile soil for anti-elite, anti-Western, anti-clergy, anti-elders, etc., narratives. It gives these religious 'players' a symbolic and comparative advantage over the traditional, existing hierarchies.

The combination of all of these factors makes today's situation highly volatile, with non-negligible risks of inter-generational or inter-religious tensions.

From the Backyard to Foreign Interferences: Towards Religious Proxy Wars in Western Africa?

Like in many other countries in the West African region, Ghana and Benin directly – and sometimes passively – interact with their immediate and with their more distant environment. The porosity of national borders, a regional continuum of human communities, shared religion, and cultural values and behaviour have all been identified as factors that directly encourage these regional and international ‘plugs’³⁸.

For decades (starting around the 1970s), these countries have also experienced more informal and underground religious influences, especially coming from the Maghreb and the Middle East. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey or Egypt directly spread through West African societies and strongly influence(d) the development of foreign-mixed Islamic trends. In today’s African religious landscape, these interferences are, at the same time, more visible (for example, the financing of mosques and activism by charitable NGOs) and more diffuse (such as external training and foreign preachers). While all of these interferences seem to cohabit peacefully at the official level, dynamics on the ground show less peaceful trends at play and violent competition among outside sponsors. The (relative) absence of the state from the regional areas is one major explanatory factor for these tensions and foreign interferences. For these foreign influences, home-grown syncretism and Sufi Islam are the only official dimensions of African Islam that do not embody the variety of all Muslim branches. Access to a nation-wide audience and to more national political influence remain goals for all of these religious movements to achieve.³⁹

The same situation prevails on the Christian side. Because Ghana and Benin are mostly Christian nations (70 per cent in Ghana and 45 per cent in Benin),⁴⁰ competition is intense among Catholic and Protestant organizations to attract new followers. The urban public space now represents the main visible arena of this rivalry, with proliferating competing offers (that is, Catholic, Evangelist, Charismatic and Pentecostal, etc.) and foreign-trained preachers. Intra-Christian competition is structured around historic Catholic churches, which were established during the colonial period and are still

38 The expression is inspired from Amselle, J.-L., *Branchements. Anthropologie de l’universalité des cultures*, Paris, Flammarion, 2001. The author describes the (economic, religious and cultural) reciprocal ‘plugs’ existing between Africa and the rest of the world throughout history.

39 Private communication with Muslim representatives, Accra (14 October 2015). For an overview of the analysis, refer to Fourchard, L., Mary, A. and Otayek, R., *Entreprises religieuses transnationales en Afrique de l’Ouest* (Paris: IFRA-Karthala, 2005).

40 Data collected during the interviews conducted with religious representatives in Ghana and Benin. For official data, see UN Data, available online at <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=POP&f=tableCode%3A28> (accessed 14 December 2015).

considered as Westerners' voices, and the new 'alternative' Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, which are more aggressive in terms of communication and generally better-funded than their old Catholic counterparts. Benin President Thomas Boni Yayi's conversion to Evangelism is one sharp illustration of the popularity of the newcomers. These American Evangelist-inspired movements have disrupted the local religious equilibrium and are exacerbating tensions within the Christian community and with Muslim groups.⁴¹ Aggressive and very divisive, these Evangelist groups are backed by a foreign ideology that aims to question Roman Catholicism's influence, by offering alternative messages (including new ways to salvation and individual accomplishment) and boosting 'community' opposition, especially towards Muslim groups (as seen by increasingly hostile sermons).

In short, the proliferation of foreign influences in sub-Saharan African countries exacerbates tensions among the religious groups and raises questions about the post-colonial status quo between Christians and Muslims (including their fixed number of followers and non-'aggressive' proselytism).

Endogenous Checks and Balances: How Africa Can Protect Itself Against Community Divisions and Violent Extremism

In both Ghana and Benin, existing institutional and functional balances play, to a certain extent, a catalysing and virtuous role in fostering national dialogues and guaranteeing peace.

West African societies always found their own endogenous ways to counter-balance successfully the centrifugal forces that could have questioned national unity or endangered the post-colonial process of state-building.⁴² At the cultural level, the ancient traditions of dialogue – with the mythical palaver tree or the social and generational *apalabre* habit in Benin, which is also called *bas* in Ghana, *grin* in Mali,

41 As long noted by Ellis and Ter Haar, 'Many pious works on Christianity on sale in Africa are authored by American evangelicals and published in America [...]. These movements acquire a specific public role when the institutions of state have rotted away'. The authors also expound on specific episodes of tensions throughout history. See Ellis, S. and Ter Haar, T., 'Religion and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2 (1998), pp. 175–201. For a recent analysis of this phenomenon in Benin, see Mayrargue, C., "Les christianismes contemporains au Bénin au défi de la pluralization. Dynamiques d'expansion et porosité religieuse », *Afrique Contemporaine* 252, 2014/4, pp.91-107.

42 Oral histories often emphasize these political and societal models (such as oversized coalitions, pleasant cousinship, etc.) that, even when mythicized, play an important role in a society's cohesion. For examples and details on these traditions, see Ki-Zerbo and Niane (eds), *Histoire Générale de l'Afrique, tome IV*.

or *Fada* in Niger and Burkina Faso⁴³ – are an interesting illustration of these self-protective tools. Traditional leaders and kings are fully part of this conflict-preventive architecture. From the thirteenth century, and notably since the creation of the Sudan Empire (which included territories in both Ghana and Benin), their authority depended on their ability to unify territories and to bring about peace between communities. Emperors were assisted and advised by local kings, *cadis* (military governors), traditional authorities and religious counsellors. These authorities gathered into a great council, or consultative *Majilis*. *Primus inter pares* (and generally selected among the most valiant combatants), they could have been overthrown for not succeeding in their stabilizing missions.⁴⁴ In Ghana, their authority is still respected and they continue to play an active role in preventing conflict or fostering dialogue between groups and communities.⁴⁵

African political societies are also often inclined to emphasize dialogue and overwhelming groups (such as by inclusive coalitions and oversized cabinet) in order to protect the regime from destabilizing interferences, but also to secure the power of a few elites (by buying their own political tranquility). The north–south *modus operandi* in Benin, the numerous forums and dialogue arena in Ghana, and all of the existing mechanisms elsewhere in the West African region (from the Niger National Council for Political Dialogue to the 65 Cameroon ministers) insist on these dialogue-seeking efforts and shared grounds for stability on the political level.

In some cases, the defence and security forces could play a moderating role and actively arbitrate the tensions within local societies. The example of Niger in 1996 and 2010, with military interventions to prevent political destabilization, are good illustrations of African militaries' positive influence. As republican and secular forces, these military corps are supposed to be the first rampart against any domestic or foreign-supported interferences. Their missions could, however, suffer several obstacles that directly question their balancing role and could even turn them into threats to stability (such as a lack of allocated means to fulfill their mission properly, distrust regarding their

43 The Apalabre, Bas, Grin or Fada are places where people – most of the time men – from the same age cohort gather to discuss or share social activities.

44 Developments on the Sudan Empire and its first Emperor, Sunjata Keita, can be found in Innes G., *Sunjata: Three Madinka Versions* (London: Redwood Burn Limited, Trowbridge & Esher, 1974); or Niane D.T., *Soundjata: An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Longman, 1971). For more general considerations on the role of tradition in politics, see Simkins, C. (ed.), *The Prisoners of Tradition and the Politics of Nation Building* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1988).

45 Most of the interviewees in Accra emphasized the role of traditional leaders' and elders' institutions (such as the National Peace Council) in the country's stability. See Pescheux, G., *Le royaume Asante (Ghana): parenté, pouvoir, histoire, XVIIème–XXème siècles* (Paris : Karthala, 2003); and Dieterlen, Sylla and Soumare, *L'Empire du Ghana*.

alleged political interference, and corporatist tensions at play, especially between the old military hierarchy and the youngest officers).

Last but not least, the religious leaders have also played an active role in regulating existing tensions and organizing peaceful cohabitation among all of the movements. In Ghana, the Interreligious Platform and the Inter-Faith Religious Group are still operational in organizing an effective and fruitful dialogue between the main cultural trends in the country. In Benin, the Inter-Religious Dialogue project has the ambition to do the same. The existence of a largely shared voodoo/animist culture in Benin, however, figures for now as a useful substitute and core element for national unity.

All of these mechanisms appear to be highly valuable for West African stability. Despite the weakness of the (local) states, these mechanisms have prevented community clashes and played an important and virtuous role in protecting countries against inter-religious violence. They have even limited the establishment of radical organizations on national territories and the enrolment of young nationals into the armed groups. However, together with the growing domestic tensions (caused by economic crisis and demographic pressures), the multiplication of external religious threats (such as Boko Haram) now puts pressure on the African states and questions the solidity of these traditional tools.

Recommendations

Although violent extremism – as we have seen it develop in Nigeria and Mali – has not yet reached the countries that were visited as part of this research project, all of the ingredients required to create similar violent clashes are present in Ghana and Benin. Apart from the population, which feels marginalized and economically and otherwise excluded, there are also charismatic religious leaders, parallel societies, a youth ‘bulge’ with few prospects, strongly opposing positions and the geographic proximity of violent conflicts. The latter, especially the Nigerian conflict, has a geographical reach that is beyond the borders of Nigeria and touching its neighbours, more specifically Benin.

Prevention is still a relevant option and a number of actions should be undertaken in order to make policy responses that are more in tune with these new trends and phenomena:

By the governments in close cooperation with civil society organizations (CSOs) and with the support of the international community:

1. A Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) action plan should be developed, initially at a national level. This should be initiated by government (mainly by the Ministry of the Interior and Religious Affairs) and CSOs jointly. Youth groups and key

leaders in the urban environments must be part of this exercise, which should be as inclusive as possible. A mapping exercise should be the first step in the process to ensure that all of the relevant actors are on board. This process must empower government representatives, traditional and religious leaders, and youth groups actively to identify hotbeds of radicalization and to counter extremist messaging and recruitment activities. The end result would be for better trust between state and non-state actors, in order for the authorities to be better informed on existing societal frustrations, and for the most vulnerable groups to perceive the added value of the government and traditional leaders, in terms of cultural values but also for the improvement of living conditions. External expertise (mostly from the United Nations) would be required by local states in the region.

By the governments with support from the United Nations:

- 2.** A national discussion needs to take place, for example on the basis of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1624 (2005), about the possible limitations to freedom of expression and hate speech in specific contexts. Representatives of the press, religious leaders and 'major witnesses' from the political and academic fields should be part of this process of finding consensus on the limitations to freedoms in public discourse and expression of opinions.

By the political parties and the national religious associations:

- 3.** All societal actors should be mobilized to create space for a new generation to step forward and take societal and other relevant leadership positions. Political parties and associations need to create more space for the new cohorts and make them more accountable (for example, by training courses and leadership positions). These efforts must be more specifically directed towards students and urban youth in more generic terms, in order to generate new groups of youths with leadership skills. Incentives, assistance and funding would be required.

By the government, with the support of international technical and financial partners:

- 4.** Development of the peripheral region and a more visible presence by the central state in remote areas (including the delivery of services, infrastructure and border control, etc.) would represent a major contribution to acceptance of the central state by communities all over the territory. External expertise and economic incentives (such as tying aid and decentralized assistance) would help to improve policy effectiveness and the accountability of local governments. By creating new opportunities, state authorities would significantly reduce the attractiveness of organizations that try to win hearts and minds through alternative service delivery systems and the creation of parallel societies.

By the government (mainly the ministries of Defence and Interior), with the support of their foreign allies (from the region and elsewhere):

5. Better identification of hotbeds of radicalization and recruitment. Actions that are directed at winning hearts and minds, increasing resilience, community policing and early warning should be concentrated around these hotbeds (mostly border regions and urban areas). The city of Tamale in Ghana, or Djougou in Benin, would represent a good start. These actions should be taken in parallel with actions that are focused on gathering information about recruitment (scope and space) by Boko Haram and others. Most of the time, this information already exists and only needs to be centralized. Dialogue with local communities and nomad groups is essential in this context.
6. Qualitative investments in border-control efforts are urgently needed to prevent illegal border crossings by foreign fighters travelling to Nigeria. Regional dialogues (at bilateral or multi-lateral levels) are required to improve intelligence-sharing on these populations flows. More formal initiatives (such as a regional memorandum of understanding between West African states that are impacted by the foreign fighters' issue) could also represent a positive step in this awareness (such as joint patrols, intelligence-sharing and regional warrants). Specific training courses for border police and judicial authorities to deal with these 'new' trends could help the effectiveness of the local government's response. With the punctual support of international partners, better knowledge and monitoring of terrorists' financing would contribute to empowering local governments with updated data and assist them in developing new ranges of responses and preventive mechanisms.

By the Ministry of the Interior and organizations that are active in the country:

7. An increasing number of external actors are present and active in the religious war zone of West Africa. Better coordination and greater transparency of agendas, sponsors and the dynamics at play could significantly help local governments to target their own assistance better and to avoid possible overlaps. This coordination should be undertaken by the Ministry of the Interior, with the support of all of the active organizations (associations, NGOs and foreign states, etc.).

Apart from these policy recommendations, a number of issues require more in-depth research work. The time and funding allocated to this research mission to West Africa did not allow us sufficient scope to look into all of the issues and countries that deserve more attention:

1. Whereas Benin and Ghana both show clear indicators for potential future destabilization, some countries in the West African region remain largely under-considered by international research on the matter. The uprising in Burkina

Faso in October 2014, for instance, deeply changed the local society and the post-colonial pact that had authoritatively connected the old and new generations under the military and Blaise Compaoré's monopolistic regime. The lack of data on Burkina Faso undermines our understanding of the situation and prevents us from identifying the emerging trends that could impact internal and regional stability. The role played by Burkina Faso in the Mali crisis, its alleged proximity to some of the Malian armed and extremist movements, together with its geographical location along the West African arc of crisis make Burkina Faso another possible weak link in the West African region. The situation in Togo is roughly similar. Rather unanimously perceived as a stable country, Togo's geographical location makes this small country on the Gulf of Guinea a permeable place for foreign influences. Although Togo, unlike Benin, did not join the anti-Boko Haram coalition, its proximity to Nigeria, Benin, Ghana and other more unstable areas in the West African region represents a possible threat in the near future. The need for impartial information on Togo is very high and the proximity to the Beninese 'Islamic' region of Djougou makes it even more imperative and urgent.

2. During the research mission, we were confronted with the reality that Boko Haram has infiltrated and is recruiting in Benin, but the extent and intensity of this issue is unknown. More research should be undertaken to establish the level of presence and recruitment in the full region, especially among the 'Zongo', Islamized, urban poor community. The same is true for the presence of the Tabliq in the northernmost regions.
3. The start of Boko Haram in 2002 saw the creation of a parallel society by Mohammed Yusef in north-eastern Nigeria. The Al-Sunna structures in Ghana's northern city of Tamale may go down that same route. The potential for such developments deserves more research and monitoring to establish risks and to identify the most adequate policy response to this phenomenon.
4. At a national level, better knowledge of the defence and security forces that have to deal – as 'frontliners' – with these regionalized influences is necessary. As full members of the African societies, these forces struggle with the same economic, sociologic, political and religious-driven issues. As recently illustrated in Guinea, Niger or Mali, they could play a very active (and even proactive) role in the political field. One needs to monitor better the cross-over influences with which they are dealing in order to prevent any negative impacts on local stability.

List of Interviews

In Ghana:

- Foreign embassies
- Office of the National Chief Imam
- Church of Pentecost
- National House of Chiefs
- Ghana Muslim Students' Association
- Institute for Democratic Governance
- West Africa Network for Peacebuilding
- Tamale's Muslim Student's Association
- Tamale Central Mosque
- Ambariya Islamic School
- Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council
- Ghana Pentecostal Council
- Girl's Education Challenge

In Benin:

- Foreign embassies and defence attachés
- *Association pour la promotion des médias*
- *Confédération syndicale*
- Journalists
- *Laboratoire d'Analyse Régionale et d'Expertise Sociale*
- *Haut Conseil des Rois du Bénin*
- *Bureau du Médiateur de la République*
- *Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche*
- *Archevêché de Cotonou*
- *Conférence Episcopale du Bénin*
- *Eglise Protestante et Méthodiste du Bénin*
- *Union des Musulmans du Bénin*