

Law, Religion, Health and Healing in Africa



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M. Christian Green
Faith Kabata
Fortune Sibanda



7 THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN NIGER'S COVID-19 CRISIS

Seyni Moumouni¹

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, the Covid-19 crisis has totally changed our habits and our daily way of life, depriving us of many basic rights, including freedom of movement to come and go, both within and across borders. It put more than half of humanity into lockdown and brought much of the global economy to a standstill, depriving many people of their daily resources. It was necessary to hermetically seal borders between neighbouring countries. With regard to the Sahel countries, and Niger in particular, the existing security crisis was compounded by the health crisis.²

Indeed, for the past ten years, Niger has been facing a plurality of security threats. The presence of numerous armed and terrorist groups on the borders with Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Libya has exposed Niger to significant violence.³ In addition, there has recently been an increase in communal conflicts, an intensification of the migratory phenomenon⁴ and a still precarious political stability, all of which accentuate the recurrence of episodes of violence.⁵ This context creates an environment conducive to the infiltration of organised crime and violent extremism, which further fuels the spiral of violence and creates a climate of fear.⁶ The violence

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- 1 Director of Research in Civilization and History of Islamic Ideas, Institute of Research in Human Sciences, Abdou University Moumonui of Niamey, Niger.
 - 2 Niger is one of the vast countries west Africa with an area of 1.267.000 km. With an estimated population of about 24.2 million, of which 50.1% are women and 70% are young people under 25 (INS projection). The vastness of the territory and population growth are major challenges for the country's socio-economic development in view of the scarcity of natural resources accentuated by climate change.
 - 3 On religion and security in the region, see Moumouni S. 2018. "Religious radicalism and security threats in the Sahel", in Green MC, Gunn JT and Hill M (eds). *Religion, Law, and Security in Africa*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 21-30.
 - 4 Boyer F and Mounkaila H. 2018. "La fabrique de la politique migratoire au Niger: les approches sécuritaires et humanitaires au service de la fermeture d'une route migratoire [The making of migration policy in Niger: security and humanitarian approaches in the service of closing a migration route]", in Boyer F and Lestage F (eds). *Routes et pauses des parcours migratoires: Afrique-Amérique* [Routes and pauses in migratory journeys: Africa-America]. Paris: Cahiers du CEMCA, Série Anthropologie 3:33-40.
 - 5 On the migration crisis, in particular, see Sourou JB. 2021. "The tragedy of Amina: Migration as told by the wives of migrants", in Green MC and Kabata F (eds). *Law, Religion and the Family in Africa*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 325-331.
 - 6 On the problem of religious radicalism and fear, see Moumouni S. 2017. "Prévention à la radicalisation au Niger: Etude réalisée auprès des détenus présumés Jihadistes [Prevention

has also particularly affected women and children.⁷ When Covid-19 emerged in Niger, religious leaders were already mobilised on security issues, particularly on the prevention of religious extremism and on religious and traditional mechanisms of community conflict resolution. It is in this context that the Covid-19 pandemic appeared.

The climate of insecurity greatly affected the health and education sectors, even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Actions OCHA,⁸ more than six hundred schools were closed and 62 610 students are out of school in the Tillabéri region because of insecurity.⁹ Other regions of Niger were also affected, such as the Diffa region.¹⁰ It also affected the socio-economic activities of civilians, increased the number of internally displaced persons and contributed to mistrust of the state and its representatives.¹¹ These enormous security challenges cost the state 15% of its budgetary resources in 2017, thus reducing its investment capacity in the productive and development sectors.

The Nigerien authorities have taken measures to contain the spread of the epidemic. This analysis here seeks to examine the role of religious leaders in the crisis of Covid-19. It addresses the following questions: What were the attitudes of the authorities in the face of the Covid-19 epidemic in Niger? What measures were taken by the authorities against the pandemic? How did religious leaders

of radicalisation in Niger: A study of carried out among presumed jihadist detainees]". Niamey: Etudes de l'IRSH, February.

- 7 Moumouni S. 2017. "Rapport d'étude sur la prévention à la radicalisation au Niger: Études sur les détenus présumés djihadistes [Study report on the prevention of radicalization in Niger: Studies on presumed jihadist detainees]", IRSH-Niamey.
- 8 Chahed N. 2022. "Niger: 672 écoles fermées dans la région de Tillabéri à cause de l'insécurité (OCHA) [Niger: 672 schools closed in the Tillabéri region due to insecurity (OCHA)]", *Andolu Agency*, 27 January.
- 9 Lamizana A. 2022. "Gestion des conflits locaux et communautaires au Sahel: cas de la zone frontalière du Liptako-Gurma [Management of local and community conflicts in the Sahel: case of the Liptako-Gurma border area]". End of study dissertation G5 Sahel Defence College, under the direction of S Moumouni, Nouakchott, Mauritanie.
- 10 Moumouni S. 2016. "Boko Haram: origine, doctrine et implication dans l'instabilité régionale Boko Haram: origin, doctrine and involvement in regional instability]", *Editions mélange en hommage à Djouldé Laya, Hamidou A. Sidikou, Boubé Gado, les Sciences Humaines et le défi du développement en Afrique de l'ouest: Adaptations, Résiliences et Perspectives* [The human sciences and the challenge of development in West Africa: adaptations, resilience and perspectives: mixed edition in tribute to Diouldé Laya, Hamidou Arouna Sidikou and Boubé Gado]. Niamey: Editions Gashingo, 307-317.
- 11 Abdourrahim H. 2022. "Terrorisme et migration forcée: le Zarmaganda dans la tourmente des djihadistes, actes colloque sur le terrorisme et la criminalité transfrontalière organisés: Adaptation et évolution du droit pénal organisé par l'Association Nigérienne de Droit Pénal [Terrorism and forced migration: Zarmaganda in the turmoil of jihadists, conference proceedings on terrorism and organised cross-border crime: Adaptation and evolution of criminal law organised by the Nigerien Criminal Law Association]", *Revue béninoise des sciences juridiques et administratives*, 119-134.

become involved in the fight against Covid-19? What religious foundations were marshaled to sensitise the population to the need to respect the measures taken in the fight against the coronavirus? How could religious leaders convince people that closing places of worship is the right thing to do when they don't believe the pandemic exists?

MEASURES TAKEN BY THE AUTHORITIES AGAINST THE PANDEMIC

After the appearance of the first case of Covid-19 in Niger on 17 March 2020, in the absence of treatment and vaccine, the Nigerien authorities recommended prevention and treatment as a means for people to protect themselves from the pandemic. The authorities took several measures to control the chain of contamination and to establish communication. The government made a formal denial of the information given by a Dr Zourkaleyni Alzouma Maïga veterinarian about the coronavirus on the private television station Ténéré. In the interview, the veterinarian returned to the origin and history of the raging coronavirus. According to him, this virus, discovered for the first time in animals, could not survive the high Sahelian heat. This prompted him call upon the inhabitants of the Sahel countries not to give in to panic.¹² After this interview the Ministry of Public Health would henceforth be the only authority authorised to communicate about the pandemic. As the Nigerian government stated:

The Government wishes to formally deny the erroneous information given by Veterinarian Dr. Zourkaleyni Alzouma Maïga regarding the epidemic, which was broadcast by a local television station and widely circulated on social networks. The Government wishes to specify that only the Ministry of Public Health is authorised to communicate on the management of the coronavirus epidemic. The administrative, customary and religious authorities are responsible for the application of these measures as well as for the work of sensitisation necessary for the observance of all these measures which are imposed on all.¹³

As for the citizens, they were invited to implore God to protect Niger, to refrain from shaking hands and to wash their hands regularly with soap.

In general, the initial measures against Covid-19 were aimed at limiting the risk of importing cases from outside and limiting the transmission of the virus within national borders. The first wave of measures took place at the Council of Ministers on 20 March 2020, after the first case appeared in Niger the day before. The measures included the closure of the international airports of Niamey and Zinder, as well as land borders, schools, universities, drinking establishments and other places of leisure. The closure of the borders to medical tourism countries favoured by the

¹² "Dr vétérinaire nigérien Zourkaleyni Aloizouma Maïga: 'Le Coronavirus est un virus qui ne peut pas résister à plus de 20°C'", *Bamako.com*, 16 March 2020.

¹³ The Minister of Public Health Dr Iliassou Mainassara by communiqué of the extraordinary council of ministers of Tuesday 17 March 2020.

country's elite forced leaders to seek treatment within Nigeria and in a defective health system they did not trust.¹⁴ The number of people allowed at gatherings was reduced to fifty people throughout the country. The government instituted mandatory hygiene measures in public places, a social distancing requirement of one metre between people and free diagnosis and management of confirmed cases. It also announced consultations with religious leaders to determine measures relating to access to places of worship. In order to convince Nigeriens to stay at home, the country's authorities did not hesitate to rely on religion, using historical religious arguments that evoke the life and behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad in epidemic situations. They recalled that confinement was already practiced at the time of the Prophet.

The second wave of measures came on 27 March 2020, at a time when the pandemic was already established in Niger. It involved asking the people to pray for divine protection against the pandemic, a proclamation of the state of emergency throughout the territory, the sanitary isolation of the city of Niamey and the establishment of the curfew in the capital from 7 pm to 6 am. There was also free care for confirmed patients of Covid-19 according to officially adopted protocols, which included screening tests and enhanced protections of health personnel. Citizens and religious leaders were invited to implore God to protect Niger. In his message to the nation of 27 March 2020, then former president of the Republic of Niger Mahamadou Issoufou noted particularly his consultation with religious leaders to determine the measures relating to access to places of worship.¹⁵

CONSULTATION BETWEEN THE AUTHORITIES AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS

The former prime minister, Brigi Rafini, was instructed to organise the consultation with religious leaders that the president had mentioned that very day. During this meeting, the prime minister asked the leaders of the different religious denominations of Niger to help face Covid-19. The Minister of the Interior called on religious leaders and their communities to pray for Niger to be preserved from this scourge.¹⁶ Religious leaders demonstrated their readiness to accompany the authorities in the prevention and response against Covid-19. Among these measures was the closure of places of worship.¹⁷ The Niger Islamic Council, the Catholic mission of Niger, the

14 Niger has recorded deaths from Covid-19 of sitting and former ministers.

15 "Message à la Nation du Président de la République du 27 mars 2020 [Message to the Nation from the President of the Republic of 27 March 2020]", *Sahel*, 30 March 2020.

16 Yahaya S. 2020. "Mobilisation contre le covid 19: le premier ministre rencontre les leaders religieux [Mobilisation against covid 19: the Prime Minister meets with religious leaders]", *Sahel*, 17 March 2020.

17 It should be noted that in Niger, as elsewhere, the place of worship is also the place where the ceremonies of everyday social life are celebrated (weddings, births, deaths), where family conflicts are settled (inheritance, divorce, etc.), and where religious education is provided (schools, Quranic, biblical). Quranic school students were particularly affected

alliances of evangelical missions of Niger and the Association of Zima and Bori of Niger, the last being an association of traditional religions, all decided to close the places of worship.

Following this consultation, both Islamic Council and the Christian churches decided to suspend collective prayers and other religious events to be held in places of worship and invited the faithful to pray at home, individually or with their families. In addition, the Islamic Council and other Islamic associations issued an invitation to the *ulema* (Islamic scholars) to play a leading role in organising awareness campaigns and asked the government for substantial means to carry out this mission of general interest. Christian churches in Niger invited their faithful to observe a week of fasting and prayers at home, so that God might extend his mercy on Niger and its people.

In their statements, the religious leaders were keen to highlight the religious prescriptions of their faiths that were perfectly in line with the measures already taken by the authorities. They invited the faithful to comply with the preventive measures taken by the government and religious leaders so that Niger might be spared from the worst of the pandemic. In a statement held on 20 March 2020, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Niamey, Monsignor Djalwana Laurent Lompo, commended the efforts that the services were making in the churches to raise awareness among the Christian faithful.¹⁸ He drew particular attention to the efforts of religious leaders and the authorities to strengthen sanitary hygiene measures.

RELIGIOUS ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING CLOSURE OF PLACES OF WORSHIP

In his message to the nation on 30 March 2020, the president of the Republic Mahamadou Issoufou put in place further strategies to fight the pandemic.¹⁹ These strategies included: (1) the strengthening of prayers throughout the territory; (2) the proclamation of the state of emergency throughout the national territory; and (3) the curfew established in Niamey from 29 March at midnight.

These measures were to be respected, because any other behaviour would amount to suicide, and suicide is condemned by all religions. "Thou shalt not kill", say Christians, who consider suicide to be murder. Likewise, the Quran says: "And don't kill yourself. Allah in reality is merciful to you. And whoever commits this, out of excess and iniquity, we throw him into the fire, that is what is easy for Allah."²⁰ Protecting one's life and those of others is therefore a sacred duty. According to

by the confinement and closure of the mosque. Indeed, the Koranic students called "Almajirai" beg and live on the food donations that they collect from one house to another.

18 Yahaya S. 2020. "Declaration des leaders religieux du Niger [Declaration of religious leaders of Niger]", *Sahel*, 20 March.

19 "Message à la Nation du Président de la République du 27 mars 2020 [Message to the Nation from the President of the Republic of March 27, 2020]", *Sahel*, 30.

20 Quran 4:29-30.

former Nigerien president: “All the measures taken are in accordance with our religious traditions. Let’s respect them.”²¹

Archbishop Lompo of Niamey stressed in a message addressed to all communities on the occasion of the Feast of Passover, that the holiday was to be celebrated that year without noise or fuss, because the pandemic spares no country, no race, no religion.²² The archbishop declared Passover to be a Christian holiday. “The resurrection of Christ thus founds our faith. Christ is risen to illuminate and save the world that cries out for its desolation”, Archbishop Lompo continued for as St. Paul said, “If Christ is not risen, our proclamation is without content, your faith too is without content.”²³ The archbishop expressed hope that this Easter feast, celebrated in the spiritual family of the Church, would be an opportunity for the faithful to place their trust in God who, alone, can save us from the evil of the century that is Covid-19.²⁴

In Niger, Christian and Islamic religious holidays are officially declared national holidays and celebrated by the respective religious communities. On this occasion, religious leaders send a message of peace and solidarity to all communities. In 2020, the main difference was that the coronavirus invited itself to the holidays and changed habits and observance. The Islamic Council urged the faithful to observe the preventive measures issued by the authorities, during the blessed month of Ramadan. The Council called on the population to show endurance and protect others in accordance with the *hadith* set out by Abdourahamane ben Aouf in which he advised Umar bin Al-Khattab not to return to the confined holy city of Quddus,²⁵ saying, “I heard the Prophet say, ‘If a deadly contagious epidemic breaks out in a city, those who are inside there do not go out and those who are outside do not go in’.”²⁶ Thus, the *ulema* emphasised the coherence of the measures taken by the Nigerien authorities with the principles of Islamic law. The authorities also broadcast a message from the Council of Scholars, Saudi Arabia’s highest religious body. The message called on Muslims around the world to pray at home during Ramadan if their country recommended social distancing. Muslims were also to avoid gatherings because they were the main cause of the spread of the virus and should remember that “preserving people’s lives is a great act that brings them closer to God”.²⁷

21 See “Message à la Nation du Président de la République du 27 mars 2020”.

22 Yahaya, “Déclaration des leaders religieux du Niger”.

23 Bible. Corinthians 15:14.

24 Moctar A. 2020. “Célébration de la fête de pâques 2020: un fête marquée par la peur de la propagation du Covid-19”, *Sahel*, 14 April.

25 Caliph Omar Ibn al-Khattab was born in Mecca in 584 and died in Medina in 644. He became Caliph when he succeeded Abu Bakr in 634 and led the Islamic community for ten years.

26 See *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 5396.

27 “Coronavirus/Ramadan: L’Arabie Saoudite adresse un message important aux musulmans du monde entier”, *Le canard déchaîné*, 21 April 2020.

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS IN THE COVID-19 PERIOD

The fight against the pandemic coincided with the major Christian and Muslim religious holidays of Easter and Ramadan. The celebrations of this important moment of collective religious practice, encompassing both Christianity and Islam, fueled the fear of the authorities.²⁸ As the month of Ramadan 2020 approached, the government feared an increase in violence related to the closure of mosques. The prime minister, Brigi Rafini, then chose to prolong the restrictions and remobilised the Islamic Council. In his press briefing of 19 April 2020, the representative of the Islamic Council made three arguments in response to those calls.²⁹ The first was the duty of obedience of Muslims to the political, religious and scientific authorities of their country. He explained that healthcare workers, as holders of knowledge, were entitled to respect and obedience. In his view, such obedience was a submission to God, whereas disobedience was rebellion against God. For God said, "O you who believe! Obey Allah, His Prophet and those of you who hold authority."³⁰ The second argument concerned the reality of the pandemic, which was widely questioned by the population.³¹ On this point, the Islamic Council representative replied to all those who did not believe:

Our health specialists, who are also Muslims, have confirmed the existence of the virus, which a person can carry for two weeks without symptoms. The grouping of mosques, weddings or baptisms is an opportunity for its spread. Since it is invisible and a bearer is indistinguishable from a non-bearer, Islam recommends avoiding any gathering. The suspension of mosque attendance thus becomes an obligation accepted by all schools of Islamic jurisprudence and in the light of Islamic history.³²

Finally, the third argument concerned the merit of night prayers in the month of Ramadan, which was put forward as a pretext for calls to reopen mosques. The Islamic Council representative explained that these prayers had a supererogatory character and had more merit when they were made at home rather than at the mosque. Muslims were asked to avoid mosques during this month of Ramadan and to preserve their health and serenity.

28 Moumouni S. 2017. "Ramadan et espace public au Niger: entre pratique, religiosité et discord [Ramadan and public space in Niger: between practice, religiosity and discord]", *Nous: Revue scientifique du CERPHIS Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny d'Abidjan-Cocody*, 18(7721):85-96.

29 "Mahamadou Diallo, le premier Ministre sur les sites de prise en charge des malades du covid 19 [Mahamadou Diallo, the Prime Minister on the care sites for covid 19 patients]", *Sahel*, 20 Avril 2020, 6-7.

30 Sheikh Ousmane Malan Garba, Member, Niger Islamic Council.

31 "Le Ramadan s'accommode mal du confinement [Ramadan does not adapt well to confinement]", *Mond'Afrique.com*, 28 April 2020.

32 Toudjani AA. "Déclaration du Conseil Islamique du Niger relativement à la lutte contre le Covid-19: Le Conseil exhorte les fidèles à observer, pendant le mois béni du Ramadan, les mesures préventives édictées par les autorités [Declaration of the Islamic Council of Niger on the fight against Covid-19]", *Sahel*, 20 April 2020.

The expected serenity finally returned on 13 May 2020 with the announcement of the reopening of mosques and the lifting of the curfew. This reopening was subject to conditions: respect for barrier measures (wearing masks, hand washing, physical distancing between the faithful, individual carpets, and similar measures), ventilation of the mosque, periodic disinfection of the mosque and closure of the mosque immediately after prayer. A committee was set up to ensure the effectiveness of these measures.³³ However, the government reserved the right to close mosques in the event of a deterioration in the epidemiological situation.

In the announcement communiqué of 19 March 2020, the Secretary General of the Islamic Council justified the closing of mosques upon notification on 19 March 2020 of the first case of Covid-19 in Niger, by the fact that the Nigerien population is 99% Muslim,³⁴ such that there was risk of expansion of the disease because of the free access to mosques and following confirmation by the specialists of the dangerousness of the coronavirus and the powerlessness of the countries in front of the pandemic. The Secretary General pointed out that Islam recommends the culture of prevention. He then emphasised the decision of the World Union of Ulema to suspend Friday Prayer and daily prayers in Muslim countries affected by the pandemic in accordance with what Islam recommends regarding the culture of prevention.

ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION OF PANDEMIC MEASURES IN NIGER

It is normally the case that when there is a pandemic, people adhere to the recommendations of healthcare workers in order to avoid aggravating the disease. In the field of disease control, healthcare workers are the competent ones, and the *ulema* (Islamic scholar) has absolutely nothing to say. It is important to follow the prescriptions of healthcare workers and also to place trust in God. For some worshippers, the closure of mosques was a good and necessary action to prevent the disease. Medicine is a system of knowledge that has both a curative and preventive dimension. For some, this fact generated unwavering adherence to the measures recommended by the health services.

In Niger, the environments most affected by the pandemic were the spheres of politics and the Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey. Both of these areas allow for travel privileges and contact with other people. These are also the spheres in which people went abroad for medical treatment, leaving the rest of the national population to treat their diseases in an under-equipped and defective health system.

Some complied with the measures did so out of fear of illness, others out of fear of the authorities. Those who adhered to the measures out of fear often feared

³³ The committee was not set up, because day after day the tension fell and the political and religious authorities, apart from showing what is happening in Europe, had no more arguments of local reality to convince the population.

³⁴ In Niger, there are no official statistics on the religious beliefs of the population. Percentages vary from one religion to another and do not reflect reality.

sanctions and counter-terrorism measures more than the disease itself. They did not trust the words of the authorities and thought that they were doing the usual "sanitary theater", imposing measures on populations to restrict their public freedoms under the guise of public health and sanitation. Police brigades, sometimes accompanied by the governor of Niamey, crisscrossed the city in search of offenders. The governor warned the people of Niamey against any attempt to violate the curfew. "Those who dare to transgress these measures will be struck down at supersonic speed", the governor said.³⁵

The brief arrest of the recalcitrant imams, who were members of the Sunni groups "*ahlu al-sunna*" and "*Izala*"³⁶ of the popular districts, did not deter the other worshippers, who went to mosques in large numbers for their daily collective prayers. In highly visible places, the strategy was to pray in small groups on mats spread out in the open air in front of the mosques, which were kept closed. The instruction to avoid gatherings at the mosque was thus reinterpreted in a new sense to mean avoiding praying inside the mosque. They urged the faithful to pray collectively at the mosque, but not in it, such that "when a believer hears the call to prayer, he is not allowed to pray at home, but he must hasten to participate in the collective prayer at the mosque".³⁷

Regarding Friday Prayer, the authorities showed firmness and the population was stubborn, which made riots inevitable. Several riots were declared in the major cities of Niger. In Niamey, public and private infrastructure was ransacked in some neighbourhoods for several consecutive days. According to the police, 108 demonstrators were arrested. Anti-measures riots regularly targeted symbols of the state. When they were unable to celebrate prayer in their neighbourhoods, worshippers went in search of open mosques in other neighbourhoods. People were very attached to their religion. In their view, the mosque was the house of God and needed to remain open to pray to God. As one imam put it, "a collective prayer performed at the mosque is equivalent to 25 or even 27 rewards for a single prayer performed alone at home."³⁸ The collective Friday Prayer was the right moment for imams to justify the rejection of measures to close places of worship, according to the imam of the mosque of the small market of Niamey. In the history of the Muslim world and Niger in particular, when there is a disaster like the Covid-19 pandemic, places of worship are opened and religious people are gathered in these places to implore God. As the Niamey imam put it in a sermon, "When the faithful make his ablutions and take the direction of the mosque, God erases a sin for him

35 Issaka Hassan Karanta, the former Governor of Niamey, died a few months later, on 23 December 2020.

36 These are the fundamentalist Islamist groups known as Jama'at Izalat al-Bid'a wa-Iqamat al Sunna (Movement for the Rejection of Innovation and the Establishment of the Sunna).

37 It just talks about the obligation to pray collectively, whether it is inside or outside the mosque.

38 *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 645 and *Sahih Muslim*, 650.

by step made, writes him a reward and raises him by one degree. When he sits in the mosque after his prayer, angels invoke God on his behalf until he comes out.”³⁹

For the Muslim, the mosque is therefore not a gathering space conducive to the spread of the pandemic, but rather “the obligatory passage for access to divine grace”.⁴⁰ For the believer, this grace is the guarantee of well-being here on earth and salvation in the hereafter. To fully understand the rejection of the measure, it is necessary to identify the representations associated with mosques in Islam. The mosque is the epicentre of community life. In addition to gatherings after prayer, weddings or baptisms are commonly celebrated. It is also a space for religious learning for young people and adults, and thus for the transmission of spiritual values. By closing places of worship, the authorities were touching the spiritual interests of the faithful and shattering their dreams of earthly and heavenly happiness. When a social group loses its right to dream, it has no alternative but revolt. It is in this context that we must understand the riots related to the closure of places of worship.

Beyond spiritual considerations, we should also note the popular understandings of the pandemic. For some, Covid-19 did not exist – it was a plot by the West to consolidate its hegemony on the planet. For others, it was a divine punishment in response to the depravity of morals. Still others thought it was an invention of the political elites to capture foreign aid and restrict public freedoms. It should be noted that reasons for opposing the anti-Covid measures the motivations were not only religious or political, but also economic. Many people in Niger live from day to day, and the night-time closures of small business with the imposition of the curfew from 7:00 pm to 6:00 am seriously affected their profits and savings.

As for the security situation, the measures related to Covid-19 had a windfall effect for the Nigerien authorities, who took the opportunity to tighten their control of the populations by highlighting security and health restrictions in connection with Covid-19. Covid-19 was a pandemic of exceptional severity, but in West Africa and Niger, in particular, the population was much less affected than in other countries. Even so, the authorities considered it useful to take “security theater” type measures in the form of closing borders, prohibiting travel and confining the population. Part of the population thought that these prohibitions were unfounded and unjustified by the number of cases recorded. Some believed that these measures were undertaken in an instrumental way to silence all opposition party protests. There was perceived to be pretext and not a legitimate motive for a hardening against public freedoms that was desired by the authorities and occasioned by the crisis. In Niger, the health crisis allowed the authorities to further restrict freedom of expression and strengthen censorship and carry out arbitrary arrests. Civil society actors, such as journalist and internet users, were arrested for violating

39 Friday sermon of the Imam of the mosque of the small market of Niamey, 24 April 2020.

40 Friday sermon of the Imam of the mosque of the small market of Niamey.

Covid-19 restrictions. Covid-19 made it possible to ban civil society protests against corruption and misappropriation of public funds.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic upset our concept of the world and solidarity between nations. Africa, and nations like Niger, had been seen as prime places for the development of pandemics, such as HIV and AIDS and Ebola. Pandemics were thought to be limited to places like Africa. They were matters affecting the poor, underdeveloped countries with slums and precarious populations, along with poor hygiene and poor sanitation. For once, Africa was not responsible for the birth or development of a pandemic. The management of Covid-19 imposed new and unexpected challenges on states. In Niger, this management was made possible by the fact that the surrounding region in Africa was much less affected by the pandemic. Nevertheless, the Nigerien authorities followed the rest of the world in order in taking measures against the coronavirus.

The appearance of Covid-19 in Niger, at a time of security crisis, allowed us to analyse the authorities' crisis management capacities. Indeed, it is remarkable that the authorities spontaneously and quickly took all the measures recommended to prevent the spread of the coronavirus with a communication and awareness campaigns well organised through the media and advertising posters. Throughout the preceding ten years of security crises, the authorities have put forward what was mostly a security approach in the fight against terrorism. Still, there was not enough communication to sensitise and warn the population about the danger of terrorism and the security measures to be taken locally to prevent jihadist attacks. And yet, terrorism has claimed many more victims than the Covid-19 pandemic.

Religious leaders, too, were involved in the fight against Covid-19. The role played by religious organisations began with consultation and statements to the faithful. The state authorities found themselves in a situation of appealing to and negotiating with religious leaders to bear responsibility for the decisions taken by the authorities. The measures were ultimately more respected by Christians than

⁴¹ "Niger: le journaliste arrêté après un post sur facebook portant sur un cas suspect de coronavirus doit être libéré [Niger: Journalist arrested after Facebook post about suspected coronavirus case must be released]", *Amnesty International*, 9 March 2020. This is the biggest financial scandal in the history of Niger. The funds intended to equip the army were misappropriated under the presidency of Mahamadou Issoufou in a context of war, more than 70 billion were misappropriated by the political-military network that runs the country, with disastrous consequences for the civilian and military populations, victims of terrorism. See Aksar M. "Niger – Malversations au Ministère de la Défense: 71.8 milliards de fcfa captés par des seigneurs du faux [Niger – Malpractices at the Ministry of Defense: 71.8 billion CFA francs captured by lords of forgery]", *L'Événement Niger*, 21 September 2020. Also, funds collected to fight the pandemic were diverted to fancy purchases made by the Minister of Public Health. According to the report of the Court of Accounts there are discrepancies at the level of realisations of resources and expenditures. "Cour de Compte du Niger", *Rapport Général Public*, 2021, 94.

by Muslims. When Islamic associations are poorly structured and often copied by politicians, their words and speeches are mixed with those of the politicians, which influences their credibility with the faithful.