

Botswana Muslims

The Republic of Botswana is a small country that gained independence in 1966 after almost a century of British rule. Muslims make up about 2-3% of the country's population of about 2 million people. Botswana Muslims do not experience any restrictions regarding their right to live by Islamic rules or their right to worship.

Islam made its first appearance in the country during the era when Muslim emirates ruled the coast of East Africa and merchants paid short visits to the region. However, the establishment of Muslim colonies in the region happened in later periods. The fact that the region did not play an important part in the commercial life of the period was an important determinant in this. Following this early contact, the large-scale spread of Islam in Botswana took place through the mediation of Muslims of Indian descent who lived in South Africa.

The Muslim workers who were brought from India in the early 1800s to work in the Kwazulu Natal region of South Africa are considered to be the ancestors of the Botswana Muslims as well. In 1850 a group of Muslims from this area set foot in Botswana for the first time in search of gold but moved back to South Africa instead of settling. It was after 1886 that Muslims came en masse to Botswana with the intention of settling and engaging in trade.

Enjoying the hospitality of the local chiefs and people, the Muslim merchants of the early period settled in the Ramotswa region and established a Muslim colony there. Considering alternative trade colonies on and around the railway route a danger to their own economic interests, the British colonial government tried to hinder the activity of Muslim merchants in the area. Their economic activity having been restricted for decades, this small Muslim community did not manage to make its presence felt in the region. However, the early activities under British rule and restrictions continued increasingly in the following years, in a way that forced the Muslim community to stand on its own feet.

When, after about a century, independence was established in 1966, the Muslims obtained their religious freedom and built their first mosques. Since then the number of mosques in Botswana has risen to 20.

There is only one Islamic school located in the country. The options available to young people who want to pursue higher education are either the University of Botswana or an institution in the neighboring Republic of South Africa. As a result of the scarcity of educational institutions, Muslim parents send their children to public schools offering Western-style education, and resort to afternoon classes for Islamic education.

The commercial opportunities that have been available to Muslims since the colonial era have followed a parallel course to the rise of the developing country. The period of prosperity that came after the end of British rule allowed Muslim investors to do business in almost every corner of the country, and this has contributed to the overall progress in their economic situation.

The social composition of the Muslim community has also transformed over the 150-year period and the proportion of indigenous people within the community has risen to one third. The social composition of the Botswana Muslims differs in this way from the Muslim communities who live in other countries of Southern Africa. While Muslims of Indian descent make up 90% of the Muslim population in almost all the neighboring countries, they make up about 60% in Botswana.

As in most countries of the region, there is a serious economic and social gap between the indigenous African population who make up the majority of the population and those who settled in the country later. This social reality is true of the Muslim minority as well. That is, the economic circumstances of the indigenous African Muslims is much worse than that of other Muslims.

Westerners who are involved in the extraction of mineral resources in the country, most importantly of diamonds, have their own communities in Botswana. While Westerners can invest in any industry and area they wish, Muslims still face serious restrictions. With the diamond mine mortgage agreement with the West expiring in 2022 and attracting investors from around the world, many businessmen from Muslim

countries have begun to come to the country as well.

While Botswana Muslims used to form a closed society in the past, they are more integrated today thanks to the ethnic diversity that has developed as a result of intermarriage. Muslim NGOs in the capital city of Gaborone are engaging in Islamic activities in every area. There are continuous efforts made to actively promote Islam among various communities, principally at the University of Botswana, and at schools, prisons and exhibition centers. As religious preaching is permitted, proselytizing efforts in the country are active.

There are many ethnic groups living in Botswana. Even though the largest ethnic group, the Tswana, give the country its name, there is almost no ethnic or religious discrimination. It is possible to find Muslims of almost all ethnic backgrounds among the indigenous African communities.

Because traditional ways of living dominate rural areas in all aspects, Animist traditions sometimes prevail over religious beliefs, to the degree that some serious problems arise because many Islamic practices become mixed with local superstitions. Likewise, allegiance to tribal leaders may at times take prevalence over allegiance to official authorities. For this reason, whether a person can become Muslim or not is closely related to the attitude of the tribal elders.

Economic problems concern the Muslim minority greatly, as they do the whole country. Even though unemployment is officially at 23.8%, unofficial sources cite numbers of up to 40%. While Muslims of Indian descent mainly own commercial and medium-size enterprises, indigenous African Muslims are employed in the service industry and agriculture.

Rapid urbanization has brought along many problems, among them a serious increase in AIDS cases. 35% of the country's population has AIDS. Even though not widespread, the disease is encountered among the Muslim minority.