

Governmental Discrimination Against Religious Minorities in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990–2023

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Abstract

There have been few comprehensive empirical studies on the status of religious minorities in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). While studies on religion and politics in the region include governmental religious support (GRS) and societal religious discrimination (SRD) as potential causes of governmental religious discrimination (GRD), they do not comprehensively examine these dynamics. This study fills this gap by examining GRD against 243 religious minorities in 50 SSA countries and autonomous territories between 1990 and 2023 using round 4 of the Religion and State-Minorities dataset (RASM4). Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, we find that GRD, GRS, and SRD are all increasing in the region and that both SRD and GRS meaningfully predict GRD.

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Keywords

Africa, religious minorities, discrimination, Christianity, Islam, government religion policy

On a general level, religion continues to have enormous influence on politics and across the world (Smith and Hackett, 2012). Multiple global surveys have demonstrated the critical impact of rising discrimination against religious minorities on a broad range of outcomes, from peaceful protest to rebellion (Basedau et al., 2023). Yet we are aware of no comprehensive empirical study of the treatment of religious minorities in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This study focuses on a subset of this larger phenomenon – governmental religious discrimination (GRD) against 243 religious minorities in 50 SSA countries and autonomous territories between 1990 and 2023 using round 4 of the Religion and State-Minorities dataset (RASM4). We define GRD as “restrictions placed by governments or their agents on the religious practices or institutions of religious minorities which are not placed on the majority religion” (Fox, 2020: 20). Our goal is to provide a survey of the extent and types of GRD present across the region and how it varies across subsets of these states, as well as analyse likely contributing causes.

Specifically, we examine the impact of two factors on GRD. The first is governmental religious support (GRS), which we define as a set of government policies which support the majority religion, including legislating a wide variety of religious precepts, laws, and institutions that enforce religion, religious funding, and entanglement of religious and state institutions (Fox, 2015: 64–104). The second is societal religious discrimination (SRD), defined as “societal actions taken against religious minorities by a country’s religious majority who do not represent the government” (Fox, 2020: 56).

We find that GRD is increasing in both Muslim-majority and Christian-majority countries, as are SRD and GRS. Patterns of all three variables differ depending upon majority religion (Christian, Muslim, or no majority), but there is considerable diversity even within these categories. For instance, we find that although GRS is positively correlated with GRD in the entire region, SRD is highly positively related to GRD only in Muslim-majority countries. We also suggest that two patterns of GRD observed in subsets of states offer important insights beyond the regional context. First, extreme divergence in levels of GRD in Muslim-majority states illustrates how histories of peaceful versus conflictual spread of religion influence downstream intolerance. Second, uniformly low levels of GRD in the five SSA states with no religious majority highlight how religious diversity can counteract other causes of GRD, contributing to more tolerant societies.

This study proceeds as follows. We first discuss insights from general academic literature on religious discrimination and studies applying this focus to SSA. We then provide a detailed discussion of empirical levels of discrimination in the region. Finally, we analyse and discuss potential causes of this discrimination in light of the data.

Previous Studies on the Causes of GRD

Although multiple studies consider the general topic of religious freedom in Africa, few examine more than a few countries, and nearly all employ only qualitative methods. Existing cross-country quantitative studies tend to focus on the world more broadly with little specific attention given to patterns in SSA. One partial exception is a recent study by Jeffery-Schwikkard (2024), which examines why GRS is comparatively low in the region, with no reference to GRD. Also, Basedau and Schaefer-Kehnert's (2018) study GRD as a potential contributing cause for armed conflict and find that SSA has the world's lowest levels of GRD, though it is on the rise. They do not, however, identify any specific regional trends to explain this pattern.

The general literature on GRD discusses a wide variety of causes, in addition to GRS and SRD, the focus of this study. These include, but are not limited to, secular and religious ideologies, nationalism, protection of indigenous culture, economic factors, democracy, and anti-cult attitudes. Economic factors tend to have a minimal impact on GRD, and democratic states tend to have lower GRD. However, variation is apparent between world regions and majority religions. Demographic factors' impact on GRD is altogether inconsistent (Fox, 2016; 2020; Grim and Finke, 2011).

GRS as a Cause of GRD

Theoretical arguments connecting GRS to GRD focus on two key inferences. The first posits a link to religious ideology. As Stark (2003: 32) puts it, "those who believe there is only One True God are offended by worship directed toward other Gods." This approach is common in the literature (e.g. Appleby, 2000; Basedau and Schaefer-Kehnert, 2018; Breskaya and Giordan, 2019; Durham, 1996). There is little criticism of this argument other than that ideology is not GRD's sole cause (e.g. Sarkissian, 2015; Gill, 2008) and that religious ideologies can also support tolerance (Appleby, 2000). Cross-country empirical studies, all of which have a worldwide focus, tend to focus on this explanation and find GRS predicts GRD. (Grim and Finke, 2011; Fox, 2016, 2020).

Second, Gill (2008) argues from a rational choice perspective that governments support a religious monopoly when it is in their interest, on the intuition that this will encourage religious institutions to support the government, thereby increasing a government's legitimacy, reducing crime, and reducing political opposition. A key aspect of sustaining this monopoly is repressing other forms of religious expression. Fox and Breslawski's (2023) review of this literature highlights how this core argument is rarely challenged other than to acknowledge that factors other than Gill's (2008) theorised interest-based motivations also influence these policy decisions. By the same token, Gill (2008) also notes that governments do not always need religion's support and that GRS may be too costly relative to the potential benefits.

SRD as a Cause of GRD

In the first major quantitative study of the topic, Grim and Finke (2011) argue that societal intolerance of religious minorities leads to GRD by the following mechanism. Intolerant

elements of society, including religious actors and the general populace, pressure governments to restrict undesired religious minorities. As politicians are members of said society, they are likely to share these prejudices, making them more likely to enact discriminatory policies. Fox (2020) confirms this finding and argues that this connection between SRD and GRD is stronger when a minority is perceived as an existential threat to the religious majority.¹

Africa-Specific Studies

Studies of GRD in SSA are mostly qualitative, largely focusing upon religious freedom in individual countries. While many point out that GRS and SRD can contribute to GRD, they tend not do so in a systematic manner. Most also attribute GRD to a variety of additional historical, demographic, and cultural factors, as well as the presence or absence of intercommunal conflict or religiously motivated rebel groups, and minority-majority political alliances. The few quantitative studies on religious freedom in SSA are based on surveys such as the Afrobarometer, which are necessarily limited to examining popular attitudes, and therefore cannot directly address GRD, whose measurement requires consideration of actual policy actions enacted by governments.

Nonetheless, these comparative studies offer many important insights relevant to GRD and its causes. Several highlight that SSA countries tend to have strong constitutional commitments to religious freedom, religious pluralism, and human rights (Coertzen et al., 2016). These attributes, however, have legal, political, social, and theological aspects that require considerable effort to realise in practice (Green et al., 2018; African Human Rights Law Journal, special issue, 2014). Studies documenting the disparity between reality and legal or constitutional protections for religious freedom and human rights in Africa are common (e.g. Green, 2014; Green et al., 2018; Mafukata, 2020; Van Coller, 2019). Their conclusions are consistent with general findings that constitutional protections for religious freedoms are uncorrelated with actual levels of religious freedom worldwide (Fox, 2023).

There is considerable variation in actual levels of protection for religious freedom across the region (Fox, 2016, 2020; Fox et al., 2025). For example, in a qualitative study of forty-seven Muslim-majority states across the world, Philpott (2019a, 2019b) documents that eight of the eleven Muslim-majority states which protect the right to religious freedom are in SSA. He attributes this to several interrelated factors, which although not identical to GRS and SRD, reflect both government policy and societal factors. First, these countries have a long-standing tradition of interreligious harmony between Christians and Muslims, including celebrating one another's holidays, intermarriage, and sometimes even attending one another's prayers. Second, widespread religious syncretism blurs the lines between religions. Third, a tolerant brand of Sufism is common. Fourth, he argues that Islam came to the region through trade rather than conquest. Consequently, Muslims were treated with greater tolerance when they came to the region and now continue this tradition, where they became a majority, often actively opposing jihadist elements.

On the other hand, some of the region's Muslim-majority countries engage in high GRD. For example, Hairsine (2024) reports discrimination targeting religious minorities in Gambia, Mali, and Nigeria. According to several researchers, GRD is particularly focused on Christians, followers of African Traditional Religions, and religious "nones" (Gez et al., 2022). Outcomes include increases in religion-based violence, religious extremism, and religious minority marginalisation (Basedau and Schaefer-Kehnert, 2018; Dowd, 2015; Lind and Dowd, 2015).

When in the minority, Muslims are often targets of GRD. Several Christian-majority governments have targeted Muslims in the context of recent or continuing political violence, social unrest, or insurgencies, as in Mozambique's majority-Muslim northern Cabo Delgado Province, Shabaab insurgents in Kenya, and the recent civil war in the Central African Republic. (Vellturo and Omer, 2021).

Case studies add a considerable amount of detail to these general results. Green (2014), for example, argues that while social hostilities are a barrier to religious freedom in Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia, widespread access to social media and technology may reduce these hostilities at the local level. Rasool (2024) argues that South Africa's Muslim minority managed to avoid GRD by inserting itself into the struggle against Apartheid, making allies of the numerically dominant but deeply oppressed indigenous African population. Haynes (2025) discusses religious opposition to government as a cause of GRD, focusing on Ghana's military-led government, the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC), during the 1980s and early 1990s. The PNDC had a difficult relationship with the country's churches, which accused it of discriminating against Christians following persistent Church-based criticism of its human rights record. Church hierarchies perceived a concerted PNDC attempt to control and muzzle Christianity's political influence and portrayed it as an assault more generally on religious freedom. In the post-PNDC era, successive governments in Ghana have been notable for their minimal discrimination against religious minorities and have been keen to trumpet their improved approach to religious freedom.

Thus, GRD is common and complex in the region. Yet, we are aware of few cross-country works focusing generally on the causes of GRD in the region. General treatments of religious freedom worldwide, which include African countries (e.g. Pew Research Center [2010] and the annual United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reports), offer no detailed SSA-specific assessments of GRD and its causes. One partial exception is Mafukata's (2020) study of immigration in Africa, in which he suggests that both GRD and SRD have risen in the region due to increased regional population movement. He argues that population movements can cause social challenges, including racism, xenophobia, hatred, violence, and discrimination against religious minorities.

Altogether, these studies demonstrate that GRD in SSA is of growing importance and demands systematic exploration. While SRD and GRS are major elements of general theories of the causes of GRD, they are less systematically considered in African contexts. The goal of this study, then, is to provide an overview, mapping the terrain and providing basic empirical analysis of potential causes of GRD with a particular focus on GRS and SRD. That is, we ask how much and what types of GRD are occurring in the region,

investigate change over time, and assess the causes of GRD with particular attention to SRD and GRS.

The Religion and State-Minorities Dataset

To do so, we turn to the Religion and State (RAS) project, which collects data on government religion policy and treatment of religion minorities in 185 countries and independent territories worldwide. The RAS-Minorities (RASM4) module collects data on treatment of all religious minorities that constitute at least 0.2 per cent of a country's population as well as a sampling of smaller groups. In SSA, this includes 243 minorities in 50 countries and independent territories covering 1990 to 2023. The one exception to this is Nigeria, which RAS divides into its Northern and Southern regions due to their different religious majorities and very different religion policies, which are largely controlled at the federal state level.

Country-specific minority groups in RASM4 include both religions entirely distinct from the majority religion (e.g. Hindus in Muslim-majority countries) and denominations that differ from the religious majority (e.g. Catholics in Protestant-majority countries). RASM4 also codes multiple denominations of the same religion as separate minorities if they are treated differently and are present in sufficient numbers. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses are subject to higher GRD and SRD than other Christian minorities in multiple countries.

All variables are coded annually between 1990 and 2023, with the exception of states that did not exist or had no effective government in a given year. As several countries became independent after 1990, all statistics in the descriptive analyses labelled as 1990 are for 1990 *or the earliest year available for a country*. In this study, we focus on GRD, which, as noted, are government restrictions placed on minorities that are not placed on the majority. Restrictions on all religions violate religious freedom but are not discrimination, which entails differential and not merely restrictive treatment. RASM4 tracks fifty-nine distinct types of GRD, fifty-six of which are observed in SSA. We discuss these in more detail shortly. RASM4 measures each on a scale of 0 to 2 (1 represents minor restrictions, 2 represents major restrictions). This creates a GRD index with values between 0 and 118 in theory, though the highest score in the region is 33 against the Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea between 2017 and 2023.

Looking at our primary theorised causes of GRD, SRD is an additive index of 34 specific forms of societal discrimination committed by members of the majority religion against a minority religion, broadly including economic discrimination, speech acts, attacks on property, non-violent harassment, and violence. Each form of SRD is measured on an intensity scale of 0, absence, to 2, for a maximum possible score of 68. The highest SRD score observed is 22 against Christians in Northern Nigeria in 2016, followed by 17 for both Protestants in Zanzibar in 2014 and Sunni Muslims in the Central African Republic in 2014–2015. These levels of SRD are quite high, given that the median in the region over the entire temporal range of RAS4 is 0.

GRS includes fifty-nine distinct policies by which states support their majority religion or religious groups as a whole. These policies include legislation of religious precepts, the presence of institutions which enforce religion, financing religion, and government support for religious education. Sudan in 2019 scored highest on GRS with 31 of these policies and never dipped below 18 at any point since 1990. The next highest were Northern Nigeria at 26 from 2021 to 2023, followed by Somalia at 23 from 2004 to 2006. The median and mean scores for GRS from 1990 to 2023 were 7 and 7.7, respectively.²

Data Collection Methodology and Reliability

The RASM4 dataset, as part of the larger RAS dataset, uses the events data collection methodology developed by Gurr (1993; 2000). RAS4 collects data on a country-by-country basis. Data sources include academic, government, news, NGO, and internet sources. While the RAS4 dataset contains coding in a country-level all RASM4 codings are coded specifically for each minority. These codings encompass a broad range of public actions by governments when coding government religion policy (in this study, this includes the GRS and GRD variables). These include constitutions, laws, court decisions, and actions taken by government officials. In cases where government actions clearly contradict laws or constitutions, the actions determine the codings. Reliability checks include inter-coder reliability checks as well as a battery of statistical tests to ensure that combining the large number of individual variables in each index is appropriate. For a full discussion of these coding and reliability procedures, see the Supplementary Appendix and Fox (2011) and Fox et al. (2018).

The Correlates of GRD in SSA

In this section, we determine the correlates of GRD in SSA using a series of regression analyses, both for our full dataset and then for Christian-majority and Muslim-majority countries, respectively. In the following sections, we discuss how the correlations play out in more specific contexts. Overall, our results for SSA are consistent with previous empirical studies. We find that SRD predicts GRD in all three contexts. GRS predicts GRD for the region as a whole and in Muslim-majority countries, but not in Christian-majority countries.

Our dependent variable, as detailed above, is the GRD index, while our unit of analysis is the country-specific minority group each year the country in question was independent, and the minority group was present from 1990 to 2023. Our primary explanatory variables are the RAS4 dataset's index measures for SRD and GRS, described in the previous section. To address potential endogeneity concerns regarding the potential *backward* causal influence of GRD on SRD and possibly GRS, we lag both SRD and GRS by one year.

From the Religious Characteristics of States-Demography dataset, we control for percentage population estimates for each country's majority and each minority religion at the

year level, supplemented by external data where otherwise unavailable (Brown and James, 2018). We also control for whether each state is majority-Christian or majority-Muslim, and whether each minority is either Christian, Muslim, or Animist/Ethnic Religionist, wherein other religious minorities are the index category. We also include a measure of religious polarisation based upon observed demography of each country's annual majority and minority population shares, calculated using commonly accepted procedures (see Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2005). From the World Bank (2023), we draw each country's logged GDP per capita and annual population. Finally, from the V-Dem project, we include procedural democracy, scaled from 0 to 1, and country-regime duration, measured as the number of days a given political regime lasted as the governing power (Pemstein et al., 2023). We also control for time dependence via year-level dummies in each model. Our analyses, reported in Table 1 below, involve linear regressions clustering robust standard errors by country-minority. A battery of further descriptive statistics, bi-variate correlation analyses, and robustness checks are included in the Supplementary Appendix to address potential concerns regarding multi-collinearity, unobserved interactions, and other threats to valid statistical inference.

Our key findings are as follows. Examining the entire sample of country minorities in SSA in model 1, we find, as with previous studies, that both SRD and GRS are strongly and positively correlated with GRD, each with at least 99.9 per cent confidence. We also confirm that increasing democracy is generally associated with diminishing GRD, with at least 99.9 per cent confidence. Longer regime duration is also weakly associated with lower GRD, with at least 95 per cent confidence. Larger majority population share and greater religious polarisation, as well as smaller overall country population, are also significantly associated with higher GRD, although this may follow from inclusion of multiple population-based measures in a single model.

Parsing between Christian and Muslim majority countries, more interesting patterns arise. First, although both country samples see significant positive correlations between increasing SRD and subsequent GRD, the effect in Christian-majority countries is less statistically significant (95 per cent versus 99.9 per cent confidence) and substantively weaker by about 63 per cent. We also find that the vast majority of GRS's contribution to increasing GRD is explained by developments in Muslim-majority rather than Christian-majority countries. Whereas the coefficient for GRS is negatively signed and insignificant for Christian states, the coefficient is positively signed with over 99.9 per cent confidence, and about 39 per cent greater in magnitude than the all-countries model. We also find regime stability significantly reduces GRD in Muslim-majority countries but not in Christian-majority ones. By contrast, as in previous worldwide empirical analyses, democracy's impact on decreasing GRD is only confirmed in Christian-majority countries with at least 99.9 per cent confidence, whereas no significant effect is observed in Muslim-majority states. Finally, while greater religious polarisation and larger majority religion population share predict significantly greater GRD in Christian-majority states, they do not in Muslim-majority states.

Table 1. Correlates of Government Religious Discrimination, 1990–2023.

	(1) All Countries	(2) Christian Majority	(3) Muslim Majority
Societal religious discrimination	0.635***	0.235*	0.661**
<i>One-year lag</i>	(0.174)	(0.100)	(0.242)
Governmental religious support	0.452***	−0.017	0.628***
<i>One-year lag</i>	(0.086)	(0.057)	(0.115)
Religious majority population, %	0.051**	0.055***	0.006
	(0.017)	(0.015)	(0.057)
Religious minority population, %	−0.027	−0.036	−0.015
	(0.024)	(0.035)	(0.123)
Log GDP per capita	0.888	−0.295	5.726
	(0.625)	(0.660)	(3.646)
Log population	−1.040*	−0.503	−0.219
	(0.487)	(0.500)	(1.756)
V-Dem polyarchy score	−5.991***	−5.926***	−1.591
	(1.425)	(1.515)	(3.437)
V-Dem regime duration (in days)	−0.000*	0.000	−0.000**
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Christian majority, any type	0.743		
	(0.415)		
Muslim majority, any type	−0.044		
	(0.646)		
Christian minority	0.900	0.415	0.629
	(0.702)	(0.999)	(1.184)
Muslim minority	0.721	0.694	1.668
	(0.599)	(0.620)	(1.397)
Animist minority	0.495	0.455	−0.881
	(0.682)	(0.905)	(1.457)
Religious polarisation index	6.686*	7.222*	2.250
	(2.839)	(3.011)	(5.155)
Constant	−3.379	−1.240	−17.694
	(4.836)	(3.536)	(14.837)
Year effects	Included	Included	Included
Observations	7,893	4,953	1,884
R ²	0.383	0.175	0.670
F-statistic	5.602	5.099	70.391
p-value	(p < .0001)	(p < .0001)	(p < .0001)

Robust standard errors are in parentheses, clustered by country-minority.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

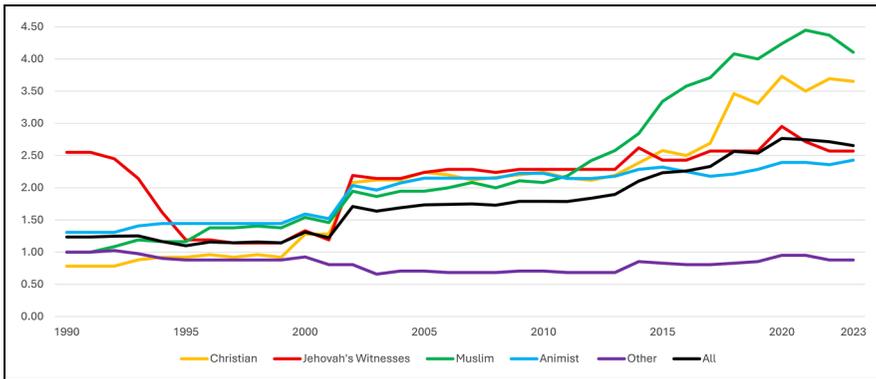


Figure 1. Overall Levels of GRD in SSA Christian-Majority Countries, 1990–2023.

GRD in SSA

To reiterate, the multi-variate analysis shows that SRD consistently predicts GRD and GRS generally predicts GRD in the region, excepting Christian-majority countries. In this section, we examine these dynamics and explore the details of the types of GRD present in the region.³

We divide the region into three categories based on majority religion: Christian, Muslim, and no religious majority. As patterns, and to some extent causality, differ across these categories, we discuss each separately and provide details on what types of GRD occur in the region. In each illustrative example, we examine contextually how GRS and SRD coincide with and possibly cause GRD.

Christian-Majority Countries

We begin our discussion with overall patterns and trends among these countries. As shown in Figure 1, overall GRD remained low until 2002 then began to increase, more than doubling between 1990 and 2023. The one exception is “other” minorities (those not Christian, Animist, Muslim, or Jehovah’s Witnesses), which experience low GRD throughout the period. In the early 1990s, GRD against the Jehovah’s Witnesses dropped due to their formal recognition or the lifting of bans on them in Ghana (1992), Burundi (1993), Congo-Kinshasa (1993), Equatorial Guinea (1994), and Malawi (1993).

Between 1995 and 2012, mean-GRD against Christians, Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Animists were roughly similar. From 2012, Christians and Muslims began experiencing higher mean-GRD relative to other religious minorities in the region. At the same time, GRD against Animists and Jehovah’s Witnesses also increased to a lesser degree.

Figure 2 shows increase over time in GRD, SRD, and GRS. Levels in 1990 are the baseline (set at 0 percent) and the figure shows the extent to which the mean level of

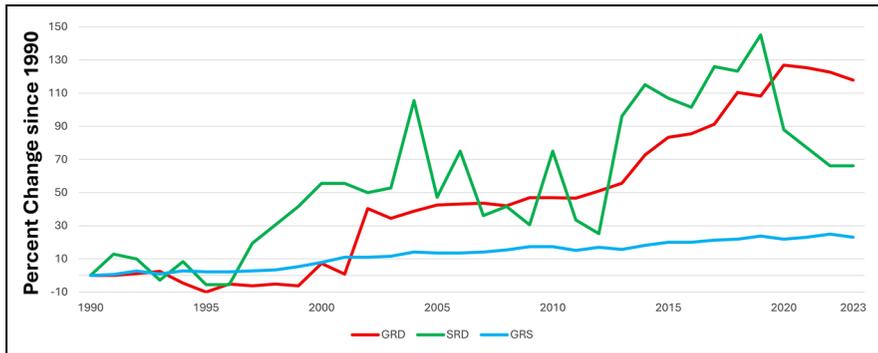


Figure 2. Change Between 1990 and 2023 in GRD, SRD, and GRS in SSA Christian-Majority Countries.

each variable was higher or lower each year as a percentage of levels in 1990. Between 1994 and 1999, levels of GRD were lower than 1990-levels then increased steadily over time hitting a peak in 2020 and dropping slightly thereafter. SRD was also below 1990-levels in 1995 and 1996. Subsequently, SRD was considerably higher but with considerable peaks and valleys. This is common for SRD, which can be more volatile than government religion policies, such as GRD and GRS which can change over time but tend to change more steadily (Fox, 2016; 2020). GRS increased mostly steadily over time but was only about 23 per cent higher by 2023 which was considerably less than GRD (118 per cent) and SRD (66 per cent).

Why is this important? It demonstrates that as SRD and GRS rose in these countries, so did GRD. While this alone cannot prove causality, it does demonstrate that GRD behaves consistently with our argument that GRS and SRD are likely important causes of GRD.

Now we turn to patterns in specific types of GRD and how they link to GRS and SRD in specific contexts. Tables 2 and 3 show all forty-eight specific types of GRD present in these countries during this period. They are generally divided into restrictions on (1) religious practices, (2) religious institutions and clergy, (3) conversion and proselytising, and (4) other types of activities. Each category includes multiple specific types of GRD, with increases in each category observed between 1990 and 2023. Of the forty-eight specific types of GRD, thirty-nine were more common in 2023 than in 1990, four were less common, and five remained at the same level. Similarly, while in 2023, 56.5 per cent of minorities experienced some form of GRD (up from 42.9 per cent in 1990), no single type was present against more than 14.9 per cent of minorities. Thus, both the presence and overall increase in GRD in the region were not due to any single type of GRD but is driven by many different types. Discussing each type of GRD in this forum is not possible due to space considerations. Instead, we focus on a small number of countries that have engaged in unusually high GRD and how this coincides with levels of SRD and GRS (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Specific Types of GRD in Christian-Majority Countries in SSA, 1990 and 2023, Part 1.

	Christians		Jehovah's Witnesses			Muslims			Animist			Other			All		
	1990	2023	1990	2023	2023	1990	2023	2023	1990	2023	2023	1990	2023	2023	1990	2023	2023
	<i>Restrictions on religious Practices</i>	23.1	34.6	23.8	28.6	23.7	60.5	25.0	39.7	26.7	22.0	24.7	37.7				
Restrictions on public observance of rel. services/festivals/holidays/Sabbath	0.0	15.4	9.5	4.8	0.0	10.5	10.7	17.9	0.0	2.4	3.2	9.7					
Restrictions on private observance of rel. services/festivals/holidays/Sabbath	0.0	19.2	4.8	9.5	0.0	10.5	3.8	14.3	0.0	2.4	1.3	10.4					
Minority required to engage in secular activities on rel. holidays/Sabbath	7.7	11.5	0.0	4.8	0.0	0.0	3.6	0.0	0.0	2.4	1.3	3.2					
Min. subject to maj. personal status laws / cannot observe own laws	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.6	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.6					
Min. in military/police/schools must participate in maj. ceremonies/prayers	7.7	7.7	9.5	14.3	5.3	5.3	10.7	10.7	14.6	14.6	9.7	10.4					
Other forced observance of religious laws of another group	0.0	0.0	9.5	4.8	2.6	2.6	3.6	3.6	9.8	5.0	5.2	3.2					
Restrictions on materials necessary for rel. rites/customs/ceremonies	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6					
Restrictions on observing dietary laws or access to such food	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.6	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.6					
Restrictions on the writing/publishing/disseminating religious publications	0.0	7.7	0.0	4.8	0.0	5.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.2					
Restrictions on the ability to import religious publications	7.7	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4	0.0	1.9	0.6					
Restrictions on rites of passage or circumcision ceremonies	0.0	3.8	0.0	0.0	2.6	2.6	3.6	3.6	0.0	0.0	1.3	1.9					

(Continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Christians		Jehovah's Witnesses				Muslims		Animist		Other		All	
	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023
	Restrictions on observing religious laws concerning marriage and divorce	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.8	2.6	5.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6
Restrictions on the observance religious laws concerning burial	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.6
Restrictions on wearing clothing which covers one's face	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	23.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.8
Restrictions on wearing rel. symbols/clothing: public employees/in schools	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.3	15.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4	2.4	1.9	4.5
Restrictions on wearing rel. symbols/clothing other than above	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.0
Restrictions on religious processions or pilgrimages.	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3
Other restrictions on religious practices	0.0	3.8	0.0	0.0	2.6	10.5	0.0	7.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	4.5
Restrictions on Religious Institutions and Clergy	12.5	59.0	28.6	19.0	21.1	47.4	7.1	25.0	7.1	17.1	17.1	17.1	16.9	31.8
Restrictions on building, repairing, and/or maintaining places of worship	3.8	15.4	4.8	4.8	10.5	15.8	3.6	7.1	3.6	7.1	4.9	4.9	5.8	9.7
Restrictions on renting/leasing spaces for worship or other rel. purposes	0.0	7.7	9.5	4.8	0.0	5.3	3.6	7.1	3.6	7.1	0.0	0.0	1.9	4.5
Restrictions on access to existing places of worship	0.0	27.9	9.5	4.8	0.0	18.4	3.6	14.3	3.6	14.3	0.0	2.4	1.9	13.0
Restrictions on formal religious organisations.	0.0	15.4	28.6	4.8	7.9	13.2	7.1	14.3	7.1	14.3	9.8	0.0	9.7	9.9
Minority religious orgs. are taxed in a manner not applied to the maj. rel.	3.8	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.6	3.8	3.6	3.8	0.0	0.0	1.3	1.3
Restrictions on foreign funding not placed on majority religious orgs.	0.0	7.7	0.0	4.8	0.0	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4	0.0	4.2
Other restrictions on receiving donations or funding	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6

(Continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	Christians		Jehovah's Witnesses				Muslims		Animist		Other		All	
	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023
	Restrictions on bringing foreign clergy into the country	0.0	0.0	4.8	4.8	0.0	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4	0.6
Registration/education requirements for min. clergy not placed on maj.	0.0	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6
Government appoints/interferes in the appointment of min. clergy	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	06
Gvt. limits communication or relationship of coreligionists outside country	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6
Min. (but not maj.) rel. must register to be legal or receive special tax status	7.7	15.4	0.0	14.3	2.6	13.2	0.0	7.1	2.4	7.3	2.6	11.0		

Table 3. Specific Types of GRD in Christian-Majority Countries in SSA, 1990 and 2023, Part 2.

	Christians		Jehovah's Witnesses				Muslims		Animist		Other		All	
	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023
	<i>Restrictions on Religious Institutions and Clergy</i> (Continued)													
Restricted access of min. clergy to military compared to the maj. religion	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6
Restricted access of min. clergy to hospitals compared to maj. religion	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.6	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.6
Restrictions on rel. orgs for charitable/medical/humanitarian activities	0.0	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6
Other restrictions on religious institutions or clergy	0.0	3.8	0.0	5.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.9
<i>Restrictions on Conversion and Proselytising</i>	7.7	11.5	4.8	9.5	0.0	7.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.9	5.3
Forced renunciation of faith by recent converts to minority religions	0.0	3.8	0.0	4.8	0.0	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.9
Restrictions on proselytising by permanent residents to members of maj. rel.	0.0	7.7	4.8	4.8	0.0	5.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	3.2
Restrictions on proselytising by permanent residents to members of min. rel.	0.0	7.7	4.8	4.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	1.9
Restrictions on proselytising by foreign clergy or missionaries	7.7	7.7	4.8	9.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.9	2.6
<i>Other Restrictions</i>	7.7	19.2	33.3	28.6	31.6	42.6	25.0	28.6	26.8	27.8	25.3	32.5	25.3	32.5
Restrictions on the running of rel. schools/rel. education in general	0.0	7.7	0.0	4.8	0.0	6.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4	0.0	4.5	0.0	4.5
Mandatory education in the majority religion	0.0	0.0	23.8	19.0	15.8	13.2	17.9	14.3	26.8	24.4	17.5	14.9	17.5	14.9

(Continued)

Table 3. (continued)

	Christians		Jehovah's Witnesses				Muslims		Animist		Other		All	
	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023
	Arrest/detain/harass rel. figures for actions other than proselytising	7.7	11.5	0.0	4.8	2.6	15.8	10.7	14.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.9
Failure to protect rel. min. from violence or punish perpetrators	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.8	0.0	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3
State surveillance of min. rel. activities not placed on maj. rel.	3.8	3.8	4.8	4.8	5.3	21.1	3.6	4.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.2	7.1
Declaration of some minority religions dangerous or extremist sects	0.0	3.8	4.8	0.0	0.0	2.6	0.0	17.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	4.5
Anti-min. rel. propaganda in gvt. publications or by gvt. officials	3.8	3.8	4.8	4.8	2.6	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.9	1.9
Restrictions on rel. speech such as blasphemy laws which are enforced	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.6	2.6	0.0	3.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	1.3
Other (1) types of restrictions on not listed above	0.0	3.8	4.8	4.8	2.6	13.2	0.0	0.0	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.4	1.3	5.2
Other (2) types of restrictions not listed above	0.0	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.9
No. of minorities	26	21	21	38	28	41	154							
At least 1 type	30.8	65.4	47.6	47.6	55.3	71.1	35.7	53.6	41.5	43.9	42.9	42.9	56.5	56.5
Mean score	0.88	3.65	2.57	2.57	1.05	4.11	1.32	2.43	1.00	0.88	1.27	1.27	2.66	2.66

While many minorities in these countries experience no GRD, only Botswana engaged in no GRD against any religious minority during this period. For most countries, levels are overall low. Angola (8.07), and Eritrea (13.60), have the highest average GRD. In both, the government uses a common tactic for restricting religion: preventing religious organisations from registering, then banning religious activities by unregistered religions (Finke et al., 2017; Sarkissian, 2015). We discuss these two cases below to illustrate the complex relationships between GRS and SRD on one hand and GRD on the other.

Rising GRD in Eritrea coincides with an increase in GRS but not SRD. Thus, in this case, the likely causality is a simultaneous shift in government policies supporting religion and restricting religious minorities that took place beginning in 2002. Before 2002, GRD in Eritrea was moderate, with only four government-sanctioned religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Sunni Islam, Roman Catholicism, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. In 2002, the government required all other denominations to register, reregister, or cease all religious activities and has generally denied registration to all petitioners since. This effectively made all of these denominations illegal, resulting in the closure of their places of worship and bans on their religious practices (Eritrea: Religious Persecution, 2005), which the government has continuously enforced since 2002 (US State Department, 2002–2023). The government harasses and often arrests members of non-recognised faiths, particularly for participating in unauthorised religious services and refused to release them until they signed statements promising to return to the Orthodox Church. By 2005, nearly 2000 prisoners of conscience were in jail (Eritrea: Religious Persecution, 2005). Arrests continue to occur often. Several hundred religious leaders and over 1000 laypersons estimated to be jailed at any given time for practicing their religion (Eritrea: Another 100, 2022). There are also reports of torture of detainees, with many remaining imprisoned years without charge. Jehovah's Witnesses have been hit particularly hard by these practices (US State Department, 2002–2023).

The Eritrean government also bans all Muslim practices that do not adhere to their preferred form of Sunni Islam and closely monitor even Sunni organisations. It restricts funding from countries where Islam is the dominant religion on grounds that it threatens to import foreign “fundamentalist” or “extremist” tendencies. The government similarly bans most foreign funding to many Protestant organisations but allows funding of Catholics from the Holy See. Although Catholics have generally faced far fewer restrictions, in 2019, the Catholic Church was forced to transfer the operation and administrative authority of twenty-two health clinics to the Ministry of Health (US State Department, 2010–2023).

As noted, the government's changes in religion policy which began in 2002 combined increased support for its four recognised religions and the revocation and denial of registration for all other religions is a classic tactic to support majority religions and other preferred religions while at the same time restricting minority religions. There are other subsequent indicators of increased attention to religion by the Eritrean government. In 2009, it began requiring all citizens to acquire an exit visa before leaving the country, which includes a declaration of one's religion (US State Department, 2009–2010).

Similarly, religious groups may print and distribute documents only with the authorisation of the Office of Religious Affairs, which routinely approves such requests only for officially recognised religious groups. If a religious institution disseminates a publication or broadcast without government approval, the responsible party is subject to a fine of up to 10,000 nakfa (\$667) and/or two years' imprisonment (US State Department, 2009–2014).

SRD is low in Eritrea and is unlikely a cause of GRD there. The few recorded incidents include unknown persons vandalising the Jewish section of the main cemetery in Asmara in 2018 (US State Department, 2018). Between 2009 and 2011, there was also evidence of private individuals reporting Jehovah's Witness religious activities to the government (US State Department, 2009–2011). These low levels are consistent with general findings that SRD is often low in repressive states with high levels of GRD. These states tend to consider SRD violations of public order and societal desires to repress minorities are fulfilled by the government. (Fox, 2020).

Angola is a majority Catholic country, with RASM4 coding Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, and Animists as minorities. Increased GRD in the country coincides with similar rises in both GRS and SRD.

GRD against Animists in Angola was generally high throughout the period. GRD against Muslims and Protestants rose during the study period. The Angolan government has repeatedly refused to recognise Islam, and as a result, Muslims are unable to build or maintain places of worship, register, or receive tax benefits given to other religions (US State Department, 2010–2023). The government also promulgates a negative and fearful image of Islam and its practitioners. This began to escalate in 2012 and 2013. In 2013, Angola president José Eduardo dos Santos said that the country was working toward putting an end to Islamic influence in Angola once and for all, and the Minister of Culture stated that Islam's expansion would damage the organisation and structure of Angolan society (Mende, 2013). Beginning in 2006, the government increasingly denied permits to build mosques and closed multiple mosques (US State Department, 2006–2013). In 2013, this escalated with government closures of multiple Islamic cultural centres, schools, and at least seventy-eight mosques (Laxmidas, 2013). This practice continues (US State Department, 2014–2023). In October 2018, the government issued a decree giving unregistered religious groups thirty days to collect 100,000 signatures or else be shut down. The decree also banned unregistered religions from worshipping in public or private, though we found no reports of preventing worship in private homes or that this was enforced on animists (Freedom House, 2019).

While previous to 2015, some Protestant denominations in Angola had difficulty registering, resulting in a lack of tax benefits, there was little significant GRD against them. In 2015, the government banned the *A Luz do Mondo* sect, an offshoot of the Seventh Day Adventists led by pastor José Kalupetek (Allison, 2015). The government had previously denounced them as destabilising for their practice of prohibiting schooling and vaccinations for their children. Government forces sent to arrest Kalupetek were met with armed resistance, resulting in multiple deaths. The group ceased to exist in 2018 (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2019). The

government's 2018 decree noted above further shuttered multiple Protestant churches and organisations, marking a significant increase in GRD against Angolan Protestants (US State Department, 2018).

This rise in GRD coincides with increased GRS and SRD in Angola, including allowing government-favoured religious organisations broadcast radio licenses and the government's establishment of the National Institute for Religious Affairs (INAR) around 2004 (Tablet, 2018; US State Department, 2018). INAR, which operates under the Ministry of Culture, serves as the adjudication authority for the state recognition of religions. In addition, the Ministry of Culture is tasked with providing oversight for religious activities within the country and monitoring the doctrines of all religious groups to ensure that they are consistent with the constitution (US State Department, 2007–2023). In 2019, the Catholic Church and Angolan government signed an agreement (Holy See, 2019). In addition to affirming the cooperative relationship between the two, the government recognised Catholic wedding ceremonies, so Catholic marriages do not require any other civil ceremonies. However, for all other religious groups, the government recognises only civil wedding ceremonies (US State Department, 2022).

A significant portion of SRD in Angola seems to come from the Catholic Church. For example, the Catholic Bishop of Benguela Province, Eugenio Dal Corso, stated in 2014 that Islam was incompatible with certain aspects of the constitution and asked the government to consider the risk of recognising Islam as a religion in the country (US State Department, 2014). Media outlets commonly portray Muslims as terrorists and invaders who seek to replace Angolan culture (US State Department, 2023). There are also multiple reports of religious leaders urging the government to repress small unregistered churches that disrupt “social harmony” (US State Department, 2018–2023). In a more serious incident, “assailants released a toxic gas among the 7,000 persons gathered at the Viana Assembly Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses for their annual congress. More than 400 individuals were affected, mainly by causing victims, including young children, to faint” (US State Department, 2017).

Muslim-Majority Countries

We begin our discussion with overall patterns and trends among these countries. As presented in Figure 3, levels of GRD reveal a different pattern in Muslim-majority countries. Average levels are considerably higher than in Christian-majority countries but relatively stable until they begin to rise between 2012 and 2018 then drop. As shown in Figure 4, which presents change in time in GRD, GRS, and SRD, using the same methodology as in Figure 2 above, this drop coincides with one in GRS but not SRD. This drop in GRS and GRD, as we discuss in more detail below, was mostly due to a significant policy change in Sudan in 2019. Through 2018, SRD rose mostly in tandem with GRD but continued to rise thereafter as GRD dropped though, again, this drop in GRD is mostly due to a single case. GRD is highest against Christians throughout the period followed by Muslim minorities (e.g. Shia Muslims in Sunni-majority countries). Animists and other non-Muslim, non-Christian religions scored well below the mean on GRD.

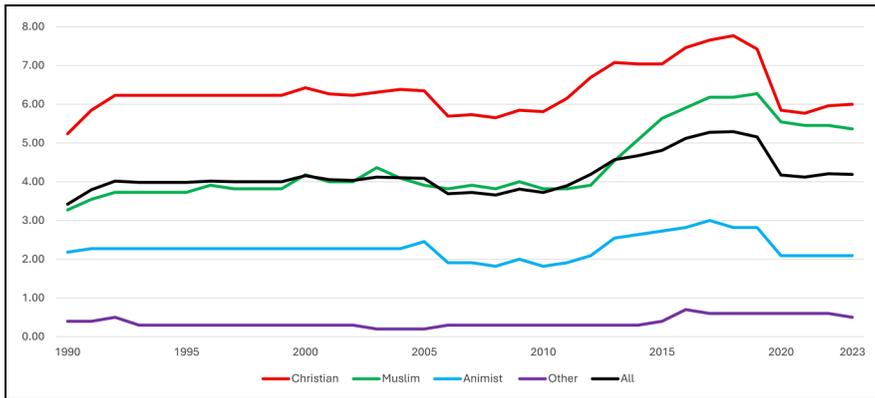


Figure 3. Overall Levels of GRD in SSA Muslim-Majority Countries, 1990–2023.

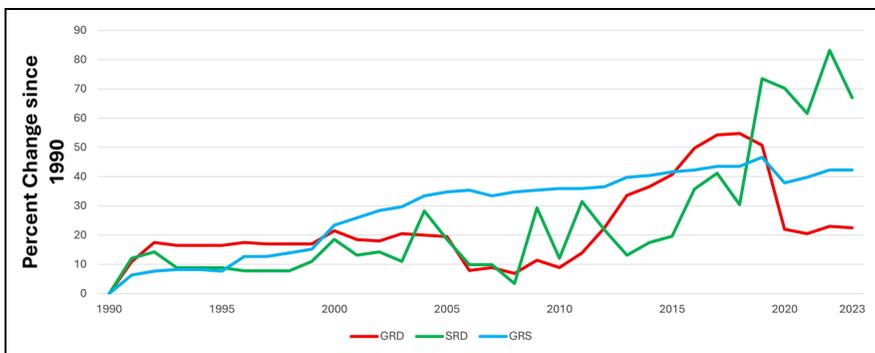


Figure 4. Change Between 1990 and 2023 in GRD, SRD, and GRS in Muslim-Majority Countries.

Now we turn to patterns in specific types of GRD and how they link to GRS and SRD in some specific contexts. As shown in Tables 4 and 5, as is the case in Christian-majority countries, the types of GRD present in these countries are diffuse. Forty of the fifty-nine types of GRD measured by RAS4 are present against at least one minority. Twenty-three were more common in 2023 than in 1990. Eleven were less common, and the remaining six remained at the same level. No single type was present against more than 24.1 per cent of minorities. All four of the more general categories were more common in 2023 than in 1990. Thus, this rise is not driven by any single type of GRD.

There is a clear dichotomy within these states. Most engaged in little or no GRD. Based on averages across all minorities for the entire period, in 2023, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Senegal engaged in none. Mali (0.26), Niger (0.29), Sierra Leone (0.05), Zanzibar (0.25), Djibouti (1.77), Gambia (1.01), and Guinea (1.78) engaged in low levels.

Table 4. Specific Types of GRD in Muslim-Majority Countries in SSA, 1990 and 2023, Part 1.

	Christians		Muslims		Animist		Other		All	
	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023
<i>Restrictions on Religious Practices</i>	42.3	34.6	18.2	27.3	18.2	18.2	0.0	0.0	23.1	24.1
Restrictions on public observance of rel. services/festivals/holidays/ Sabbath	11.5	7.7	9.1	9.1	0.0	18.2	0.0	0.0	6.9	8.6
Restrictions on private observance of rel. services/festivals/holidays/ Sabbath	0.0	7.7	0.0	9.1	0.0	18.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	8.6
Minority required to engage in secular activities on rel. holidays/ Sabbath	7.7	7.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.1	0.0	0.0	3.4	5.2
Min. in military/police/schools must participate in maj. ceremonies/ prayers	0.0	3.8	0.0	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.4
Other forced observance of religious laws of another group	39.8	23.1	18.2	18.2	9.1	9.1	0.0	0.0	19.0	15.5
Restrictions on materials necessary for rel. rites/customs/ ceremonies	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7	0.0
Restrictions on the writing/publishing/disseminating religious publications	19.2	7.7	9.1	0.0	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.1	3.4
Restrictions on the ability to import religious publications	19.2	7.7	9.1	0.0	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.1	3.4
Restrictions on access to religious publications for personal use	3.8	3.8	9.1	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.4	3.4
Restrictions on rites of passage or circumcision ceremonies	0.0	0.0	9.1	18.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7	3.4
Restrictions on observing religious laws concerning marriage and divorce	0.0	0.0	9.1	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7	1.7
Restrictions on the observance religious laws concerning burial	3.8	0.0	0.0	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7	1.7
Restrictions on wearing rel. symbols/clothing other than above	11.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.9	0.0
Restrictions on religious processions or pilgrimages.	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7
Other restrictions on religious practices	0.0	11.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.2
<i>Restrictions on Religious Institutions and Clergy</i>	34.6	50.0	18.2	36.4	18.2	18.2	30.0	30.0	27.6	37.9

(Continued)

Table 4. (continued)

	Christians		Muslims		Animist		Other		All	
	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023
Restrictions on building, repairing and/or maintaining places of worship	19.2	42.3	0.1	18.2	9.1	9.1	0.0	0.0	12.1	24.1
Restrictions on renting/leasing spaces for worship or other rel. purposes	0.0	11.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.2
Restrictions on access to existing places of worship	7.7	26.9	0.0	27.3	0.0	9.1	0.0	0.0	3.4	19.0
Restrictions on formal religious organisations.	0.0	0.0	0.0	18.2	0.0	0.0	20.0	20.0	3.4	6.9
Registration/education requirements for min. clergy not placed on maj.	3.8	3.8	9.1	9.1	0.0	0.0	10.0	10.0	5.2	5.2
Min. (but not maj.) rel. must register to be legal or receive special tax status	7.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.2	0.0
Restricted access of min. clergy to jails compared to the maj. religion	12.5	12.5	9.1	9.1	9.1	9.1	0.0	0.0	8.6	8.6

Table 5. Specific Types of GRD in Muslim-Majority Countries in SSA, 1990 and 2023, Part 2.

	Christians		Muslims		Animist		Other		All	
	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023
<i>Restrictions on Conversion and Proselytising</i>	34.5	34.5	18.2	27.3	27.3	27.3	0.0	10.0	24.1	27.6
Restrictions on conversion to minority religions	15.4	26.9	9.1	18.2	9.1	9.1	0.0	0.0	10.3	17.2
Forced renunciation of faith by recent converts to minority religions	0.0	3.8	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.4
Forced conversions of people who were never members of the maj. rel.	0.0	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7
Efforts/campaigns to convert members of min. rel. which do not use force	15.4	11.5	0.0	0.0	9.1	9.1	0.0	0.0	8.6	6.9
Restrictions on proselytising by permanent residents to members of maj. rel.	30.8	19.2	18.2	18.2	9.1	9.1	0.0	10.0	19.0	15.5
Restrictions on proselytising by permanent residents to members of min. rel.	15.4	15.4	9.1	18.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	8.6	12.1
Restrictions on proselytising by foreign clergy or missionaries	33.1	19.2	18.2	18.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	13.8	12.1
<i>Other Restrictions</i>	26.9	38.5	27.3	27.3	18.2	18.2	0.0	0.0	20.7	25.9
Restrictions on the running of rel. schools/rel. education in general	0.0	12.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.2
Mandatory education in the majority religion	23.1	23.1	28.3	28.3	18.2	18.2	9.1	0.0	19.0	17.2
Arrest/detain/harass rel. figures for actions other than proselytising	11.5	11.5	0.0	0.0	9.1	9.1	0.0	0.0	6.9	5.2
Failure to protect rel. min. from violence or punish perpetrators	11.5	15.4	0.0	9.1	9.1	9.1	0.0	0.0	6.9	8.6
State surveillance of min. rel. activities not placed on maj. rel.	11.5	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.2	1.7
Custody of children granted to maj. rel. on the basis of religion	11.5	15.4	0.0	0.0	9.1	9.1	0.0	0.0	6.9	8.6

(Continued)

Table 5. (continued)

	Christians		Muslims		Animist		Other		All	
	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023	1990	2023
Declaration of some minority religions dangerous or extremist sects	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7
Anti-min. rel. propaganda in gvt. publications or by gvt. officials	0.0	11.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.2
Anti-min. incitement by/in public school teachers/administrators/textbooks	7.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.4
Other (1) types of restrictions on not listed above	15.4	7.7	9.1	18.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	8.6
Other (2) types of restrictions not listed above	3.8	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7
No. of minorities	26		11		11		10		58	
At least 1 type	53.8	53.8	36.4	45.5	36.4	27.3	30.0	39.0	43.1	43.1
Mean score	5.50	6.00	3.27	5.36	2.18	2.09	0.40	0.50	3.57	4.19

Other than Zanzibar, a semi-autonomous island of Tanzania on Africa's eastern coast, all are located in the Northwest SSA.

The other Muslim-majority countries and independent regions in the region engaged in much higher levels of GRD: Comoros (16.38), Mauritania (8.26), Northern Nigeria (10.26), Somalia (10.12), Somaliland (12.03), and Sudan (22.89). It is worth noting that these high-GRD Muslim-majority countries have GRS and SRD that were 60.7 per cent and 92.0 per cent higher, respectively, than the low-GRD Muslim-majority countries. This indicates a strong link between SRD and GRS on one hand and GRD on the other in SSA's Muslim-majority countries.

For illustrative purposes, we discuss Sudan, the country with the highest GRD. Sudan has gone through two significant religion policy shifts during the study period. First, Sudan disestablished Islam in 2005 in the context of its peace agreement with South Sudanese rebels, leading to South Sudan's independence in 2011. This resulted in a slight drop in GRD, which began to rise again afterward. It did not result in any significant changes on GRS as the government largely continued its previous policies other than it did not designate Islam as an official religion. However, it did coincide with a large drop in SRD mostly because much of the SRD involved the treatment of minorities in the region that became South Sudan and occurred in the context of the civil war in the region.

Second, a 2019 regime change included a new constitution, which for the first time did not mention Sharia law. Many forms of GRD were eliminated or weakened, lowering Sudan's GRD score in 2020 to around half of what it had been at the beginning of 2019. GRS also dropped by 38.3 per cent from 31 per cent to 19 per cent. While these levels are still among the highest in the region in the 2020–2023 period, they do demonstrate that the government's decision to lower its support for Islam had immediate consequences for levels of GRD.

The new regime significantly reduced enforcement of Islamic restrictions on women, removed a constitutional clause banning apostasy, and repealed a public order law that had banned mixed dancing among many other types of support. SRD in contrast dropped for most minorities in Sudan earlier in 2012 after the independence of South Sudan ended that civil war. It remained high for Protestants, and there was little SRD against Shia Muslims in Sudan throughout the period (US State Department, 2011–2023).

Prior to the 2019 constitution, the government appointed an Evangelical Community Committee (ECC) to oversee Protestant churches. It would often sell church property to private Muslim investors against the will of the church's members. Church members who objected to the appointments or sales were often arrested (US State Department, 2014–2019). Arrests, harassment, and harsh punishments such as lashings of Christians were common on a range of charges including indecent or immoral dress, espionage, undermining the constitution, obstruction, warring against the state, criminal trespass in their own churches, and disturbing the peace (American Center for Law and Justice, 2015; Amnesty International, 2018; Five Churches, 2017; Salih, 2015).

Proselytising, while technically not illegal, generally resulted in arrest under other charges. Non-citizens caught proselytising were, if not jailed, deported. Churches were often denied land and permits to build. The government often refused to renew work

and residency visas to foreign church employees on suspicion that they would proselytise, a policy that had a particularly negative impact on the Catholic Church. Despite being protected by the constitution, most Christian groups were unable to import teaching materials and religious texts. All Arabic-language Christian Bibles found at Port Sudan were confiscated. Non-Sunni Muslim clergy had limited access to jails where most religious services are for Muslims, and non-Muslim prisoners were encouraged to convert in return for parole. Officially converting away from Islam until 2019 was punishable by death. In practice, it could result in arrest and forced renunciation of conversion. In custody disputes in which the father is Muslim and the mother a Christian, courts granted custody to the Muslim parent (US State Department 2010–2019).

Since 2019, the practices of the ECC have remained the same, but the government is more willing to grant visas to religious workers. There are also far fewer reports of arrest and harassment of religious minorities, including for proselytising. Thus, while the policies of the state are largely the same, they are enforced far less vigorously (US State Department, 2019–2023).

Countries with No Religious Majority

Five countries in SSA have no religious majority. This is the highest concentration of countries with no religious majority in the world and constitutes more than half of such countries worldwide (Fox, 2015). Thus, the patterns found in these countries provide a good example of what happens when there is significant religious diversity.

Based on averages across all minorities for the entire period, these countries engage in low GRD: Benin (0.04), Côte d'Ivoire (0.81), Guinea-Bissau (0.22), Mauritius (1.18), and Togo (1.05). Nine of the thirty-two religious minority groups in these countries experienced no GRD at any point between 1990 and 2023, and an additional thirteen never experienced a level higher than 1. The group experiencing the most GRD in these countries were Protestants in Togo. Open Doors (2022) reports restrictions on building and renovating Protestant places of worship. Also, in 2022, the government closed multiple charismatic churches due to noise complaints (US State Department, 2022).

All these countries also have significant GRS ranging from 4 to 9 during this period. These levels are just slightly below average for the region, which rose from 6.87 in 1990 to 9.08 in 2023. Furthermore, in these countries, GRS tends to be applied to *all* major religions. This suggests religious diversity meaningfully counteracts other negative influences and coincides with low GRD, particularly when GRS is equitably distributed. Moreover, SRD was near zero in 1990 in these countries but only rose to a still low mean level of 0.44 in 2023.

Overall, the comparative evidence shows that shifts in GRD often coincide with shifts in GRS and SRD, but this is not always so. This is consistent with the empirical analysis, which shows that GRS and SRD are important factors in causing GRD in the region but, as these tests do not by any means explain all of the variation, this leaves room for a myriad of other factors to influence GRD. This is consistent with the existing literature on religion and politics in Africa as well as existing general theories on the causes of GRD.

Conclusions

This study both confirms previous findings from cross-country studies of the causes of GRD and highlights how SSA is unique, providing new insight into the causes of GRD. Previous studies have shown that while GRS and SRD are causes of GRD, the details of these findings can vary considerably based on religion and majority religion. For example, SSA has unique patterns, including a low average level of GRD despite having some countries with very high GRD (Fox, 2016; 2020). We confirm this general finding but provide more detail and nuance than previous studies. As is the case globally, states with higher societal inter-religious animus, which we measure with SRD, and governments strongly connected to religion, which we measure with GRS, are more likely to discriminate in SSA. As GRD, SRD, and GRS have increased over time in the region, this finding is increasingly relevant.

Yet some distinct patterns emerge. First, for Christian-majority countries, this increase in GRD began in earnest around 2002, likely in part caused by policies in reaction to the events of September 11, 2001. This was followed by a second acceleration in GRD around 2012. In Muslim-majority countries, the bulk of the increase in GRD occurred after 2011. This rise in GRD is driven by the increased presence of a wide range of policies across many countries, so it is systemic to the region rather than driven by a few cases or a few types of policies. Despite this increase, in 2023, nearly 113 of the 243 (46.5 per cent) religious minorities in the region experienced no GRD. This is far lower than the world average per previous studies.

Second, as implied above, observed dynamics differ considerably depending on majority religion. Christian-majority governments engaged in a range of GRD, ranging from none to high levels. In contrast, most of the region's Muslim-majority states, nearly all of them concentrated geographically in West Africa, engaged in little to no GRD but a few engaged in high levels, with no Muslim-majority states in the mid-range. Thus, rather than being spread evenly from religiously free to religiously oppressive, Muslim-majority states cluster in two distinct categories: very high and very low discriminators. As noted earlier, Philpott (2019a; 2019b) attributes this to historical factors as well as prevalent syncretism in the countries with low GRD. It is also worth noting that with a few notable exceptions, particularly these high-GRD Muslim-majority states, levels of GRD in most SSA countries are lower than in many Western democracies. (Fox, 2025).

Third, the five states with no religious majority engaged in very low GRD. As this concentration of states with no religious majority is unique to the region, this provides insights into the utility of religious diversity in counteracting other factors, such as GRS that can increase GRD.

Fourth, levels of GRD differed across minority religions. One aspect of this was consistent across both Muslim-majority and Christian-majority states. Both discriminate more against Muslims and Christians than they do against Animists and other non-Abrahamic faiths. This indicates an intense competition in the region, particularly among the monotheistic religions.

It is important to reiterate that while this study highlights the influence of SRD and GRS on GRD, this does not mean other factors discussed in the literature are not important. Clearly, population movements, conflict, and religious diversity in the region, among many other factors, likely play a role. Nevertheless, this more systematic analysis of the role of GRD and SRD brings greater clarity and detail to ongoing discussions regarding important matters for RAS in SSA as well as provide insights that can be transported to other regions. They also demonstrate the utility of cross-national comparisons within SSA and that this type of research should be part of the research agenda.

Data Availability Statement

Data and replication files are available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CVDSL1>.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent Statements

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Notes

1. For further implications of the politicisation of minority identities on societal religious discrimination, see Zellman and Malji (2023).
2. Data and replication files are available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CVDSL1>.
3. COVID restrictions on religious meetings in the region when present were imposed mostly equally on all religions. In all such cases, they were not coded as GRD which focuses on differential treatment of minorities (Fox and Haynes, 2025).

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Discrimination gouvernementale contre les minorités religieuses en Afrique subsaharienne, 1990–2023

Résumé

Il y a eu peu d'études empiriques complètes sur le statut des minorités religieuses en Afrique subsaharienne. Bien que les études sur la religion et la politique dans la région incluent le soutien religieux gouvernemental et la discrimination religieuse sociétale comme causes potentielles de la discrimination religieuse gouvernementale, elles n'examinent pas de manière exhaustive ces dynamiques. Cette étude comble cette lacune en examinant la discrimination religieuse gouvernementale contre 243 minorités religieuses dans 50 pays et territoires autonomes d'Afrique subsaharienne entre 1990 et 2023 en utilisant la 4e version de la base de données Religion and

State-Minorities (RASM4). En utilisant des méthodes à la fois quantitatives et qualitatives, nous constatons que la discrimination religieuse gouvernementale, le soutien religieux gouvernemental et la discrimination religieuse sociétale sont tous en augmentation dans la région et que la discrimination religieuse sociétale et le soutien religieux gouvernemental prédisent de manière significative la discrimination religieuse gouvernementale.

Mots-clés

Afrique, Minorités religieuses, discrimination, christianisme, islam, politique publique en matière de religion