

How many Muslims are there in South Africa?

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While working with the 1996 census database I was asked whether the data would allow a statement about the number of Muslims living in South Africa. I believe that this is indeed possible. In assembling the data for religious belief and the total population by province, the following results emerge:

Table 1

Province	Muslim Population	Total Population	% Muslims in the Total Population
Western Cape	263913	3956874	6,67
Eastern Cape	17137	6302523	0,27
Northern Cape	4185	840323	0,50
Free State	2301	2633506	0,09
KZN	126749	8417019	1,51
North West	10690	3354824	0,32
Gauteng	107827	7348422	1,47
Mpumalanga	14260	2800713	0,51
Northern Prov	6655	4929371	0,14
Total number	553717	40583575	1,36

The results indicate a total number of 553,717 Muslims in the RSA, which represents roughly 1.36% of the total population. In the Western Cape the number of Muslims in relation to the provincial population is the highest, at 6.6%, followed by KwaZulu/Natal and Gauteng, both ranging close to 1.5%. In all the other provinces the share is below 1%.

However, one has to consider the accuracy of these numbers. Though this is not the place for a detailed discussion about levels of significance, one might say that they are fairly accurate. Taking into account the general circumstances e.g. very detailed information of the public on the eve of the counting and a general spirit of identification with the new government, the motifs to evade the counters are not many. Rather, technical reasons might bias the result. Two of these technical reasons should be mentioned.

Firstly, as it is widely known, the '96 Census resulted in a total figure for the number of inhabitants of South Africa that was far below expectations. This figure was also below the figures given by the previous census. There is agreement that the population has not diminished since the early '90s. Therefore, the question arises as to which census is more accurate. Speculations suggest that the changing political climate should have made the '96 census more reliable. On the other hand, these changes also affected the organisation and management of the census. This could have resulted in making the census less reliable. Only further research can provide a reasonable explanation.

Secondly, looking again at the Muslim population figures - in comparison to the figures that Haron (1997) gives for the '91 census - one finds that while the total population of the RSA has decreased, the total as well as the relative number of the Muslim population has increased.

Table 2

Province	1991	1996
Western Cape & Eastern Cape	158,119	281,050
KwaZulu/Natal	84,619	126,749
Gauteng & Northern Province	80,976	114,482
OFS / FS	245	2,301
Other	-	29,135
Total number of Muslims	323,959	553,717
% of the total population	?	1.36
Total population	43,000,000	40,583,575

The odd mixture of the provinces derives from Haron and is probably an attempt to transfer the territorial base of the four old provinces to the nine new provinces. I accommodated my numbers to the given structure for the sake of a better comparison. Still, this comparison must not be seen as being strict. The '96 figures include the "Black" and the "White" Muslims whereas the older figures do not. One could assume therefore that the increase might be a result of this incorporation. However, I doubt that this would explain an increase by roughly 220,000 Muslims, especially taking into account possible over-counting in 1991 and/or undercounting in 1996. This implies that the increase might even be higher. Forthcoming publications from *Statistics South Africa* will hopefully help to explain these findings and give more detailed answers as to the accuracy of the data. Otherwise, we will have to wait for the next census.

References:

Haron, Mohamed. 1997. *Muslims in South Africa*. Cape Town: The South African National Library.