

CAMEROON 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes the state as secular, prohibits religious harassment, and provides for freedom of religion and worship. During the year, the government implemented a series of measures, which it stated it took to preserve order within religious groups undergoing internal disputes. These included instances where internal disputes within Christian communities over the creation of new ecclesiastical districts and church leadership prompted the government to close the churches temporarily. The government encouraged religious groups to find concerted solutions to their problems and held a senior divisional officer responsible for harassing a cleric. Authorities initiated a survey of religious groups operating in the country and anticipated that the outcome could lead to the authorization of new religious organizations and the closure of previously authorized groups. Authorities did not officially lift the ban on full-face Islamic veil implemented in the Far North Region after July 2015 terrorist attacks but the government did not enforce the ban.

Boko Haram carried out a series of violent attacks, including suicide bombings, against civilians, government officials, and military forces, and threatened populations in the Far North Region. The attacks against civilians were indiscriminate and included killings and kidnappings of Muslims and Christians. The insurgents attacked places of worship. Reports suggest Boko Haram killed at least 400 civilians, police, military, and gendarmes as of the end of the year. On March 17, local media reported a military court sentenced 89 members of Boko Haram to death under the 2014 antiterror law for terrorist attacks committed in the Far North Region.

The quest for autonomy by some ecclesiastical districts often prevented the holding of worship services and, in at least one instance, led to the expulsion of members from a Christian community. Many individuals continued to associate Boko Haram with Islam and/or a specific ethnic group, which further increased stigmatization of some Muslims. Many prominent religious leaders, including imams and leaders of faith-based organizations, spoke out against actions of Boko Haram, especially its attacks against security forces and civilians. These leaders also highlighted Boko Haram's efforts to elicit support from local Muslim and Christian populations.

U.S. embassy officers discussed religious freedom issues with government officials and advocated for greater transparency and efficiency in approving the registration of religious groups. Embassy officers met with leading figures from the principal religious groups to discuss challenges to religious freedom, such as the rise of religious stigmatization. In addition, the embassy preemptively discussed the dangers of inter- and intrareligious intolerance by conducting outreach programs among religious groups to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue through one-on-one meetings.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 24.4 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2005 census released in 2010, the most recent available, 69.2 percent of the population is Christian, 20.9 percent Muslim, 5.6 percent animist, 1.0 percent other religions, and 3.2 percent report no religious affiliation. Of Christians, approximately 38.4 percent are Roman Catholic, 26.3 percent Protestant, 4.5 percent other Christian denominations, including Jehovah's Witnesses, and less than 1 percent Orthodox. There are growing numbers of Christian revivalist churches.

Christians are concentrated primarily in the southern and western parts of the country. The two Anglophone regions are largely Protestant, and the five southern Francophone regions are mostly Catholic. The Fulani (or Peuhl) ethnic group is predominantly Muslim and lives in the northern Francophone regions; the Bamoun ethnic group is also predominantly Muslim and lives in the West Region. Many Muslims, Christians, and members of other faiths also adhere to some aspects of animist beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes the state as secular, prohibits harassment or discrimination on grounds of religion, and provides for freedom of religion and worship.

The law on freedom of association governs relations between the government and religious groups. The government must approve religious groups or institutions as a prerequisite for lawful operation. Although the law prescribes no specific

penalties for operating without official recognition, the government may suspend the activities of unregistered groups. The government does not require indigenous religious groups to register, characterizing the practice of traditional religion as a private concern observed by members of a particular ethnic or kinship group or the residents of a particular locality.

To become an authorized entity, a religious group must legally qualify as a religious congregation, defined as “any group of natural persons or corporate bodies whose vocation is divine worship” or “any group of persons living in community in accordance with a religious doctrine.” The religious group must submit a request for authorization as a religious group, including the group’s charter describing planned activities, the names and functions of the group’s officials, and a declaration of commitment to comply with the law on freedom of association, to the relevant divisional (local level) office. The relevant office forwards the documents to the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization (MINATD). MINATD reviews the file and sends it to the presidency with a recommendation to approve or deny. Authorization may then be granted by presidential decree. Official authorization confers no general tax benefits but allows religious groups to receive real estate as a tax-free gift for the conduct of their activities and to gather publicly and worship. It also permits missionaries to receive visas with longer validity. Unauthorized religious groups may gather publicly and worship under a policy of “administrative tolerance” as long as public security and peace are not disturbed.

MINATD may issue an order to suspend any religious group for “disturbing public order,” which is not defined in the law. The president may dissolve any previously authorized religious organization that “deviates from its initial focus.”

The Ministry of Basic Education and the Ministry of Secondary Education require private religious schools to comply with the same curriculum, infrastructure, and teacher-training standards as state-operated schools. Unlike public schools, private schools may offer religious education.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government often temporarily closed churches, including two chapels of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) in Abong-Mbang, East Region, in a

stated attempt to solve protracted leadership crises within Christian groups. The government stated it used the measure as a means to preserve order and encourage a solution and reconciliation among those involved. PCC members stated they were frustrated with the government decision, but hoped the closures might lead to an enduring solution.

By year's end, a Quranic instructor who was arrested after security forces raided a number of Quranic schools in Quirvidig, Far North Region, in December 2014, was acquitted and released, according to the human rights organization OS-Civiles Droits de l'Homme. The organization reported at least 13 others were in pretrial detention, while according to Amnesty International there were 43 adults still being held from the raid, excluding two who subsequently died. In the same raid, 84 children were detained at a children's center for six months.

Modestine Yida Mbukwe, the plaintiff in an August 2015 case, abandoned her efforts to bring judicial action against a gendarme officer when the military tribunal did not convene a hearing. She said the gendarme insulted her because she was wearing an Islamic headscarf and tried to remove her veil by force.

The government took no action to adjudicate applications for legal status by a number of religious groups whose applications had been pending for years. The government has approved only one religious group in the last 17 years and none since 2010. According to MINATD, incomplete application submissions and lengthy background investigations contributed to delays. Although by law groups must register, the government continued to allow numerous unregistered small religious groups to operate freely under the government's policy of "administrative tolerance." While 47 religious groups were legally registered as of the end of the year, hundreds more operated without official government authorization according to religious leaders. One of these organizations, the Cameroon Bible Fellowship, has been seeking government recognition since 2002.

Unlike the previous year, authorities did not take measures to ban the wearing of full-face Islamic veil in their constituencies. While the ban implemented in July 2015 in the Far North Region remained in force, the government did not enforce the ban and many Muslim women wore burqas in other regions without issue.

During the year the government ordered a survey of religious groups operating in the country. MINATD officials said the survey would help the government gain better insight into religious organizations by researching registration status, places

and times of worship, structure, and general practices. Officials also said the survey would potentially lead to issuing new authorizations or withdrawing active ones. At the end of the year, the survey was ongoing. During the biannual conference of regional governors held in Yaounde in July, the minister of MINATD urged governors to speed up investigations related to the survey and submit their assessment reports.

The government continued to grant broad legal authority to traditional leaders to manage their districts. As part of this authority, traditional leaders continued to exercise control over local mosques, with the right to appoint or dismiss imams.

The state-sponsored television station and radio stations regularly broadcast Christian and Islamic religious services and ceremonies on national holidays and during national events. Government ministers or the president often attended these ceremonies.

The government provided an annual subsidy to all private primary and secondary education institutions, including those operated by religious denominations. The size of each subsidy was proportional to the size of the school.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

The Islamic State in West Africa Province, more commonly known as Boko Haram, designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. government, continued committing acts of mass violence in its quest to impose its religious and political beliefs. Boko Haram perpetrated numerous attacks, including mass killings, often directly targeting civilians, but also against government officials and military forces. It also threatened populations in the Far North Region. The attacks against civilians were indiscriminate and included killings and kidnappings of Muslims and Christians. The insurgents attacked places of worship. While there are no accurate estimates of total numbers killed and kidnapped, reports suggest Boko Haram killed more than 400 civilians, police, military, and gendarmes as of the end of the year.

Boko Haram carried out many suicide bombings and deadly attacks during the year. On January 13, a suicide bomber killed 12 worshippers at a mosque in Kouyape. On January 18, a suicide bomber killed four worshippers at a mosque in Nguetchewe. On January 25, a quadruple suicide bomb attack killed 32 people at a market in Bodo. On February 10, two suicide bombers killed six people at a

funeral in Nguetchewe. On May 20, Boko Haram killed at least nine persons and set 39 houses on fire in Indoua, near the border with Nigeria. On June 4, Boko Haram attacked Ali Touboun near Darack, around Lake Chad, killing 10 fishermen and injuring or abducting several others. On June 29, media sources reported a suicide bomber affiliated with Boko Haram killed at least 11 people in Djakana near the border with Nigeria. The victims were gathering near a mosque to break their fast during Ramadan. Minutes later, an attack at a video club killed at least four individuals. On September 21, Boko Haram launched a suicide attack in Djakana, Mayo Sava division, killing four civilians and wounding two others. On November 22, media sources reported suspected Boko Haram fighters launched three attacks in the northern part of the country. One of the attackers killed six individuals. No one was killed in the other two attacks.

Governor Midjiyawa Bakari of the Far North Region reported that members of a local self-defense group spotted a suspected Boko Haram fighter riding his bicycle towards the town of Mora where Christians were assembling for Christmas Mass on December 25. The defense group attempted to stop and search the man, but he detonated his explosives killing himself, a nearby civilian, and two members of the defense group. Local media also reported three other armed attacks on Christmas day in Fotokol, Belgede, and Madam, which left several wounded.

The government worked in conjunction with the Nigerian government in a joint forces campaign to free citizens under the control of Boko Haram and arrest Boko Haram fighters. On February 26, the government reported the joint forces killed 92 Boko Haram members and freed 850 individuals from their stronghold. On March 17, local media reported a military court sentenced 89 members of Boko Haram to death under the 2014 antiterror law for terrorist attacks committed in the country's North Region. On April 5, Cameroon's commander of the joint forces against Boko Haram reported more than 300 Boko Haram members were arrested and at least 2,000 people were freed from their strongholds along the Cameroon, Nigeria, and Chad borders. On May 15, the government reported the joint forces arrested five Boko Haram leaders and freed 18 women and 28 children in the northern Madawaya forest. On December 16, the border between Cameroon and Nigeria reportedly reopened for the first time in three years, signifying a decrease in threat from Boko Haram attacks.

On July 14, Amnesty International released a report suggesting more than 1,000 of the people accused and arrested of supporting Boko Haram were dying from disease and malnutrition in detention under the Cameroonian government. The

report suggested that many of the people were arrested “without reasonable suspicion that they had committed any crime” and brought to trial in “unfair trials” in military courts.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In several instances, disputes within religious communities over church personnel, church management, and the creation of new ecclesiastical districts and bylaws prevented the holding of worship or resulted in the temporary closure of churches. The churches most affected include the PCC parishes in Ebolowa, Abong-Mbang, and Ngaoundere, as well as the Anglican Church of Cameroon Archdiocese of Northwest and West regions.

Deputy Administrator of Northwest and West regions’ Archdeaconry Board of the Anglican Church of Cameroon Reverend Nchinda stated in a letter dated February 5 that the Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Cameroon, Dibo Thomas Babyngton Elango, infringed on Nchinda’s group’s right to freedom of worship. The accusation was in response to an ongoing dispute since 2013 in which Archdeacon Emmanuel Yuh sought to separate from the Anglican Diocese of Cameroon and form a separate diocese, stating that Elango gave preferential treatment to Nigerian clergy over the Cameroonian clergy who were fewer in number. As a result, Elango reportedly suspended Yuh for six months without pay, banned him from the premises, and named new pastors to run the archdeaconry.

On August 11 in Ebolowa, South Region, authorities temporarily closed the Elat PCC church following debates among three of its factions. In January the PCC General Assembly created three separate pastoral units out of the existing Ntem presbytery, the Ntem, Endam, and Mvangan-Jerusalem presbyteries. The three conflicting factions could not agree on the church’s administration.

Similarly, on February 24, local authorities upheld the closure of the Nkol-Mvolan and Mbama chapels in Abong-Mbang, East Region, which have been closed since 2014. On May 3, Justin Mvondo, the senior divisional officer (SDO) for Vina in Adamawa Region, attempted to evict PCC Pastor Bouloumegue Boyomo from Ngaoundere as a result of an internal conflict regarding the creation of new pastoral units. The SDO and pastor belonged to opposing factions of the PCC. According to media sources, the SDO intended to use his prerogatives as SDO to have his own faction control the Philadelphie PCC parish in Ngaoundere. The governor of Adamawa and the delegate general for national security, with

MINATD's approval, intervened to prevent Boyomo's expulsion. The MINATD minister declared that the SDO's decision was a threat to public order and stated the SDO would be held personally liable for the consequences of his actions against unity, peace, and freedom of worship.

Many prominent religious leaders and organizations spoke out against Boko Haram, its attacks against security forces, and its attempts to elicit support from local populations. In May the Council of Imams and Religious Dignitaries of Cameroon (CIDIMUC), a civil society organization aimed at promoting interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance, met for its fourth annual conference and raised awareness about peace and security challenges and "responsible citizenship" of imams.

Christian and Muslim leaders reported they worked together to protect their communities from violence from Boko Haram. In addition, the media reported some Christians secured mosques during prayer sessions while Muslims reciprocated and guarded churches on Sundays, therefore minimizing a surprise terrorist attack by Boko Haram. This grassroots-led strategy of protecting one another's place of worship was tested in certain villages of the Far North Region along the Nigerian border and was expected to be extended to the entire region, according to Governor Midjiyawa Bakary.

Some Muslim leaders in the northern part of the country stated that Boko Haram was not about religion but about terrorism alone. Some also noted that the greatest issue was not of interreligious tensions, but intrareligious. Many individuals continued to associate Boko Haram with Islam and/or a specific ethnic group, which further increased stigmatization of some Muslims. The Muslim leaders stated that the more moderate versions of Islam (i.e., Tijaniyya) were being threatened by more fundamentalist versions (i.e., Wahhabism), which in some cases was exacerbated by generational gaps. Other Muslim leaders believed there was no such conflict within Islam.

In December during the Feast of Tabaski in Yaounde, some Christians joined Muslim groups to celebrate. According to media, community members commented that religious tolerance was a necessary strategy to combat Boko Haram. Furthermore, according to a Muslim leader, Christians and Muslims sang and paraded together in Fouban during Ramadan.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy regularly discussed religious freedom and the importance of interfaith dialogue with government officials including the first vice president of the senate who is also a *Lamido* (traditional Islamic leader); the minister delegate of external relations in charge of “relations with the Islamic World; and divisional level administrative officers. In exchanges with the government, embassy officers advocated for greater transparency and efficiency in approving the registration of religious groups. Embassy officers also raised the matter of protracted issues over church leadership and personnel within Christian groups.

On November 14, the Ambassador visited the northern part of the country where he met with Muslim traditional leaders and local government officials. Embassy officers also met with prominent leaders from Christian and Muslim communities, including the coordinator of CIDIMUC, a former president of World Conference of Religions for Peace, and the secretary general of the Islamic Union of Cameroon. In addition they met with the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Garoua, the Archbishop Emeritus of Douala, the Garoua principal imam, Garoua Poupoure Imam, and the deputy administrator of Northwest and West regions’ archdeaconry board of the Anglican Church of Cameroon. The conversations included discussions on promoting religious tolerance and peacebuilding. The embassy underscored the commitment of the United States to interfaith dialogue and cooperation in the face of threats by Boko Haram.

The embassy sponsored a project to engage youth to prevent violent extremism and radicalization. The project helped raise the awareness of 500 youth leaders across the country about the importance of preventing radicalization in the name of religion. The messages delivered to youth leaders during the project included calls for religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue, and rejection of a religious struggle between Muslims and Christians.

The embassy funded two projects promoting religious tolerance. The first brought together more than 150 civil society and religious leaders with government and U.S. embassy representatives to address and promote intergenerational, interreligious, and multicultural dialogue. As part of the project, three participants traveled to Maroua, two weeks after the bomb blast in the market square, to interact with the victims of the Boko Haram attack. The three participants held a workshop with 40 youth leaders from Maroua in which they shared their experiences with Boko Haram attacks and discussed strategies and best practices for how youth could fight radicalization.

The second project addressed issues of religious intolerance among youth and used drama, poetry, spoken word, and music to promote diversity and inclusion and build religiously tolerant communities. The project trained 100 peer leaders to train other youth using social media to spread peaceful messages on religious tolerance. The project sponsored the first national spoken word and poetry contest on religious tolerance, and participants contributed to the development and production of a radio drama series on religious tolerance.