

CAMEROON 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution stipulates the state is secular, prohibits religious harassment, and provides for freedom of religion and worship. The law requires religious groups to receive government approval to operate and allows the president to dissolve any existing religious groups; however, hundreds of religious groups operated freely without official government authorization. The government has not registered any new religious groups since 2010.

Many prominent religious leaders, such as the imam of the Douala Central Mosque, spoke out against Nigerian-based terrorist group Boko Haram and its attacks against Cameroonian security forces and attempts to elicit support for those attacks from local populations.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom issues with government officials, advocating for greater transparency and efficiency in approving the status of religious groups. Embassy officers met with prominent figures from all principal religious groups to discuss challenges to religious freedom, outreach among religious groups, religious tolerance, and interfaith dialogue. Embassy officials participated in a seminar organized by imams on peace and security and hosted a roundtable discussion on interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 23.1 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the 2005 census, the most recent available, 69 percent of the population is Christian, 21 percent Muslim, and 6 percent animist. Groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Jews and Bahais. Approximately 38 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 26 percent Protestant, 4 percent other Christian denominations including Jehovah's Witnesses, and less than 1 percent Orthodox Christian.

Muslims and Christians live in every region, although Christians are concentrated primarily in the southern and western regions. Large cities have significant populations of both groups. The two Anglophone regions are largely Protestant, and the five southern Francophone regions are mostly Catholic. In the three northern Francophone regions, the dominant Fulani (or Peuhl) ethnic group is predominantly Muslim, but the overall population is fairly evenly divided among

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Muslims, Christians, and followers of indigenous religions. The Bamoun ethnic group of the West Region is predominantly Muslim. 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 secular nature of the state and its neutrality with respect to all religions, prohibits religious harassment, 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. Indigenous animist groups, however, are not required to register.

To register, 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, 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. That 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. The president may then grant authorization by presidential decree. Official recognition 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.

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

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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.

Government Practices

In September the government allowed 34 predominantly evangelical churches it had closed in 2013 to reopen. Local government officials had accused the churches of disturbing public order with raucous services, extorting the spiritually vulnerable, destabilizing family structure, and practicing unsafe “spiritual medicine” such as exorcisms, which had reportedly led to some deaths.

The government delayed the approval of legal status for a number of religious groups, including some from the United States, whose applications had been pending for years in several cases. The government has approved only one religious group in the last 15 years and none since 2010. According to MINATD, incomplete application submissions and lengthy background investigations contributed to approval delays. Although by law groups must register, the government allowed numerous unregistered small religious groups to operate freely under the government’s policy of “administrative tolerance.” While 47 religious groups were legally registered, hundreds more operated without official government authorization.

The government did not register indigenous religious groups, 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.

The government granted broad legal authority to traditional leaders to manage their districts. As part of this authority, traditional leaders exercised control over local mosques and had 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.

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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 Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

The Nigerian-based terrorist group Boko Haram carried out increasingly violent and frequent attacks 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. While there are no accurate estimates of total numbers killed and kidnapped, according to the Ministry of Defense, Boko Haram killed hundreds of police, military, and gendarmes. Estimates of the total numbers of civilians killed vary, but number in the hundreds.

Boko Haram kidnapped numerous citizens and more than a dozen expatriates, including religious personnel, in several incidents. On July 25, Boko Haram carried out a coordinated attack in Kolofata, kidnapping at least several dozen citizens, including the wife of Deputy Prime Minister Amadou Ali and the mayor and traditional leader of Kolofata. Several civilians were also killed in the attack. Boko Haram subsequently released the expatriates and the group kidnapped from Kolofata.

Tens of thousands of internally displaced persons fled their villages near the Nigerian border in the wake of Boko Haram attacks.

The government deployed thousands of soldiers to the Far North Region to secure the border and counter Boko Haram's incursions. Special forces also implemented civil-military cooperation programs to encourage the local population to report suspicious behavior and contact law enforcement officials with concerns.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Many prominent religious leaders, such as Sheikh Ibrahim Mbombo Moubarak, the Imam of the Douala Central Mosque, spoke out against Boko Haram and its attacks against Cameroonian security forces and attempts to elicit support for those attacks from local populations. President Biya and other political, as well as many religious, leaders praised the Muslim community for rejecting the violent extremist message of Boko Haram.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy regularly discussed religious freedom issues with government officials. Embassy representatives also met with prominent representatives from all principal religious groups to discuss challenges to religious freedom, outreach among religious groups, religious tolerance, and administrative issues. In interactions with the government, embassy officials advocated for greater transparency and efficiency in approving the status of religious groups. Embassy officers met with prominent figures from the Christian and Muslim communities, including the coordinator of the Council of Imams and Muslim Dignitaries of Cameroon; the secretary general of the Islamic Union of Cameroon and chairperson of the Cameroon Council of Imams, Mosques, and Islamic Affairs; and the archbishop of Douala. Those discussions focused on interfaith dialogue, religion and peace building, and religious tolerance. The embassy also participated in a conference of imams on peace and security, and sponsored a roundtable discussion on interfaith dialogue, bringing together representatives of several religious denominations.