

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	223
Land:	Cameroun
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Cameroon
Udgivet:	12. maj 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	21. maj 2021

USDOS – US Department of State

2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Cameroon

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes the state as secular, prohibits religious harassment, and provides for freedom of religion and worship. According to media and religious leaders, most abuses involving religious freedom occurred in the English-speaking Northwest and Southwest Regions, where a violent separatist conflict continued. In July, security officers killed a timekeeper at a Protestant church in Bangem as he rang the bell for morning prayers. In August, soldiers looking for separatists arrested and killed a Protestant pastor and several of his followers in the village of Mautu. In October, security forces arrested a Catholic priest one day after he began a protest march to raise awareness about violence in the Anglophone region and call for the release of political detainees. Also in October, gendarmes in the town of Ndop arrested the pastor of the Cameroon Baptist Convention, stating that he supported separatists spiritually and financially. Religious leaders in the Anglophone regions repeatedly accused security forces of burning churches, forcing residents to quarter soldiers, and desecrating religious spaces and objects. On several occasions, Christians in the Northwest and Southwest Regions said security forces interrupted church services and prevented them from accessing places of worship. In August, the government shut down a Yaounde church whose leaders preached that COVID-19 was a hoax and refused to comply with official public health mandates on crowd sizes. Religious leaders expressed frustration with the government's failure to register any new religious groups for the 10th consecutive year and said many requests remained pending.

According to multiple media outlets and civil society organizations, Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa (ISIS-WA) continued to carry out violent attacks against civilians and military forces. Insurgents attacked places of worship and private homes. According to religious and civil society organizations, in more than 20 separate attacks in the Far North Region in January, presumed Islamist terrorists killed more than a dozen Christians, burned at least three churches, and destroyed nearly 200 homes. In August, suspected Islamist terrorists killed 14 community leaders in Bulgaram in the Far North Region during preparations for evening prayers in the local mosque, reportedly because community leaders cited the Quran while criticizing terrorism.

Media reported that Anglophone separatists in the Northwest Region killed a religious leader in Batibo who criticized their actions. In a separate incident, religious leaders in the Northwest Region accused separatists of killing a pastor in Batibo and of vandalizing churches and destroying worship articles in the village of Nwa. Religious leaders and civil society expressed concern over worsening relations between largely progovernment Muslim Mbororo herders and Anglophone, predominantly Christian, communities. In October, suspected separatists abducted parishioners in Kumbo during a pilgrimage to pray for peace in the Anglophone regions. Throughout the year, Muslim and Christian leaders initiated interfaith activities aimed at facilitating interreligious dialogue, promoting peaceful coexistence of different faiths, and seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, where Anglophone separatists were seeking secession. In March, Christian and Muslim leaders collaborated with UNICEF, sharing ideas on appropriate messaging by religious groups within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Embassy officials discussed with government officials the failure to register faith-based organizations. They also underlined the effect of the sociopolitical crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions on freedom of worship as well as the importance of interfaith dialogue with government officials, including regional delegations from the Ministry of Social Affairs and the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms. In discussions with leading figures from the main religious groups, U.S. embassy officers stressed the importance of interfaith dialogue, the necessity of assuring religious freedom within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need for a peaceful solution to the continuing crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. In August, the embassy issued a press release condemning the killing of a religious leader in Batibo and called for those responsible to be brought to justice.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 27.7 million (mid-year 2020 estimate). According to the 2005 census, the most recent available, 69.2 percent of the population is Christian, 20.9 percent Muslim, 5.6 percent animist, 1.0 percent belongs to other religions, and 3.2 percent reports no religious affiliation. Among Christians, 55.5 percent are Catholic, 38 percent Protestant, and 6.5 percent other Christian denominations, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Orthodox churches. The 2010 Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project found that 70.3 percent of the population was Christian, 18.3 percent Muslim, 3.3 percent animist, 2.7 percent other religions, and 5.5 percent with no religious affiliation. Of Christians, the Pew Survey found that 38.3 percent were Catholic and 31.4 percent were Protestant. There is a growing number 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 (Peuhl) ethnic group is mostly Muslim and lives primarily 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.

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 registration, 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 a registered 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 entity must submit a request for registration as a religious group and include with it the group's charter describing planned activities, 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 (MINAT).

MINAT reviews the file and sends it to the presidency with a recommendation to approve or deny. Registration is granted by presidential decree. Official registration confers no general tax benefits but allows religious groups to receive real estate as a tax-free gift for the conduct of activities and to gather publicly and worship. It also permits missionaries to receive visas with longer validity. Unregistered religious groups may gather publicly and worship under a policy of "administrative tolerance" as long as public security and peace are not disturbed.

MINAT may issue an order to suspend any religious group for "disturbing public order," although no legislation defines these terms. 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

Media and religious leaders said most abuses of religious freedom were related to the armed conflict involving English-speaking separatists in the Northwest and Southwest Regions and nonstate extremist actions in the Far North Region.

According to media reports, on July 4, security forces shot and killed Brice Ebangi, a timekeeper at the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon (PCC), as he rang the church bell at 5 a.m. to summon congregants for morning prayers. According to the international nongovernmental organization (NGO) Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRD), the soldiers who entered the village of Bangem, Southwest Region, before dawn to conduct "antiseparatist operations" shot Ebangi outside the church building as he conducted his daily bell-ringing routine. The soldiers

reportedly said Ebangi rang the bell to alert residents to their arrival. According to media, the soldiers also arrested and physically assaulted several civilians, injuring one individual, and looted and burned several houses.

According to CHRDA, on August 13, government forces arrested and later killed a pastor and two of his followers from the Repentant Servants Church of Ambazonia in the village of Mautu in the Southwest Region. Soldiers reportedly entered the church, over which flew an "Ambazonia" flag associated with Anglophone separatists, arrested the pastor and several of his aides, and killed two who attempted to escape. An August 13 video posted on social media showed soldiers interrogating the pastor and his followers before he was killed.

On October 13, multiple media outlets reported that police arrested a Douala-based Jesuit priest, Ludovic Lado, as he marched from Douala to Yaounde to raise awareness about violence in the English-speaking Northwest and Southwest Regions. Police in Edea, 40 miles from Douala, interrogated Lado before returning him to Douala. Lado said his protest underscored the right to organize peaceful protests. He called for the release of hundreds of members of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement political party arrested for antigovernment protests on September 22.

On January 19, according to a January 21 statement released by PCC moderator Samuel Forba Fonki, security forces arrested a PCC pastor after the Sunday service in Bali Nyongha in the Northwest Region. The statement said the pastor was physically assaulted, incarcerated, and hospitalized after his release, and it described the incident as "sacrilegious to the worship of God."

On February 19, PCC moderator Fonki issued a press release stating that unidentified individuals set fire to the Presbyterian church in Mbufong-Bali in the Northwest Region. A February 17 video on social media showed members of the church lamenting the loss of the church building. According to media, government forces battling Anglophone separatists carried out the attack. While the PCC statement did not directly blame government forces for the attack, it stated that "a military solution would not resolve the ongoing conflict in the Anglophone regions."

According to a pastor of the Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) based in Bamenda, on July 18, soldiers occupied the CBC church in Pinyin, Northwest Region and used it as a base from which to carry out attacks against separatists. The pastor said the soldiers killed two persons, broke into homes, looted stores, and stole property. Soldiers reportedly roasted animals in the church and desecrated the sanctuary.

On October 17, media reported local gendarmes in Ndop, Northwest Region, arrested Pastor Samuel Kensam Konseh, a chaplain and former Director of Evangelism and Missions of the CBC. According to a church leader, security forces accused Konseh of collaborating with and financially supporting separatists but released him on October 20.

According to media, on June 21, soldiers arrested parishioner Kuoh Nawayn during a Mass at Catholic St. Anthony's Church in Njinikom, in the Northwest Region. Witnesses said security forces released Nawayn shortly after her arrest and that the reason for her arrest was unclear.

According to CBC pastor Godlove Nchanji, on February 5, soldiers occupied the CBC mission compound in Ntumbaw during military operations and threatened him with a machete when he asked them to leave on February 12. Nchanji said soldiers questioned him on February 16 after he spoke to Human Rights Watch and left the compound the same day.

On September 18, according to Sandra Che, a member of the Catholic Church in the Alamatu neighborhood in Bamenda, security forces ordered parishioners to leave during a prayer session. Observers said soldiers forced parishioners to sit on the floor and verbally abused them before forcing them to return to their homes. According to an official at the Presbyterian Church in Alamatu, during Bible study on September 22, soldiers seeking Anglophone separatists repeatedly fired their weapons on the church premises and remained outside the chapel in which parishioners had locked themselves. The official said parishioners laid on the floor and hid under pews until the soldiers left.

According to PCC pastor Gustav Ebai, government forces and armed separatists in the Anglophone regions regularly prevented individuals from participating in worship. Multiple online media outlets reported that on June 21, members of the Catholic Church in M'mouck Leteh in the Southwest Region had to interrupt the Mass and take cover as soldiers and separatists exchanged gunfire near church grounds. On September 13, the *Guardian Post* newspaper reported that soldiers disrupted church activities and prevented residents of Bamenda from attending church services during military operations against separatists.

On August 5, authorities shut down the Tabernacle of Liberty Church of All Peoples in Yaounde after church leaders described COVID-19 as a hoax and reportedly told members not to comply with government measures to contain the pandemic. According to Center Region Governor Paul Bea Naseri, three students who were members of the church refused to comply with the mandatory school mask policy because their pastor forbade the practice. According to *Voice of America*, many followers continued to worship in front of the church after the government shut it down.

The government again took no action to adjudicate applications for registration by a number of religious groups whose applications had been pending for years. The government approved only one new religious group in the last 18 years and none since 2010. Although by law groups must register, the government continued to allow hundreds of unregistered small religious groups to operate freely under its policy of “administrative tolerance.” Some religious group members suggested the government used the delay in registrations as a way to curb unregistered churches and to create tension between those with proper credentials and those without.

On October 8, a religious leader said that officials at MINAT could do little to facilitate the registration process because the Presidency, which had final authority, was unwilling to register new religious groups. He said the government did not view freedom of religion as an individual right and that the government often closed unregistered churches for perceived violations by individual pastors.

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 and other officials 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 the subsidy was proportional to the size of the student body.

Actions by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Boko Haram and ISIS-WA continued to commit acts of mass violence within the Far North Region in what observers said was an attempt to impose their religious and political beliefs. Boko Haram continued to target Muslims, Christians, and animists without apparent distinction, while ISIS-WA tended to attack military and other government installations.

According to the interdenominational Christian aid agency Barnabas Fund, at the beginning of January at least 300 presumed Islamist terrorists raided five mostly Christian villages in Mayo Tsanaga Division, killing several Christians and burning two churches. Barnabas Fund reported that on January 6, terrorists killed two Christians in the villages of Hitere and Hitawa and three others in the village of Moudokou. On January 7, they killed a Christian in the village of Guedjele. During a January 17 attack on the predominantly Christian village of Hidoua, terrorists killed five civilians and destroyed at least 195 houses, according to the NGO report.

According to NGO Aid to the Church in Need, on January 6, suspected jihadists burned down the Church of Saint Peter, in Douroum, in the Far North Region. On January 24, Bruno Ateba, Bishop of Maroua-Mokolo, told NGO representatives that terrorists launched at least 13 attacks on churches within his diocese in January.

On August 25, suspected Islamist terrorists killed 14 community leaders in Bulgaram in the Far North Region during preparations for evening prayers. According to media, most of the killings occurred in the local mosque. A resident of the town said terrorists attacked after community leaders cited the Quran while criticizing terrorism and forbade members of the communities from providing supplies to ISIS-WA fighters based in Nigeria.

In January, Open Doors USA, a U.S.-based NGO advocating for Christians throughout the world, ranked the country 48th among countries in which Christians are most persecuted, partly due to an increase in Boko Haram and ISIS-WA attacks. Open Doors stated the country had not been included among the top 50 countries in prior years but that “...restrictions and threats are growing for Christians.” The Open Doors report said that radicalization increased in the predominantly Muslim northern regions where it said local residents “hate and threaten” those who convert from Islam to Christianity. A civil society observer in the Far North Region said that Boko Haram and ISIS-WA attacks against religious groups in the Far North significantly decreased compared with previous years because terrorists increasingly focused on members of local community “vigilance” committees.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and politics are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to multiple media reports and the United Nations, in August suspected Anglophone separatists kidnapped and killed Reverend Christopher Fon Tanjoh, a Bible translator and pastor of New Apostolic Church in Batibo in the Northwest Region, who also worked with local NGO Community Initiative for Sustainable Development. According to media, separatists abducted Tanjoh

on August 7 after he publicly accused them of committing crimes against local residents and urged separatist leaders to stop “terrorizing and extorting” civilians. The attackers shot Tanjoh in the leg before abandoning him at the entrance of St. John of God Hospital in Batibo, where he bled to death.

According to media reports, at least 30 mostly Muslim nomadic Mbororo herders joined soldiers who killed at least 23 civilians in Ngarbuh, Northwest Region. According to a CBC pastor based in Bamenda, the killings in Ngarbuh were just one example of worsening relations between predominantly Christian Anglophones and Muslim Mbororos in the Northwest Region. On September 9, *Voice of America* reported many Mbororos fled their homes in the Northwest Region because of repeated attacks after refusing to support the separatist cause. In April, NGO Refugees International reported that tensions between Mbororos and largely Christian farmer communities in the Northwest increased. Observers said the government used Muslim Mbororos as informants and participants in attacks against separatists and separatists did the same with Christian farmers. According to Bamenda-based human rights lawyer Elvis Luma, the separatist violence in the Anglophone regions deepened the divide between Muslim Mbororos and Christians in the Northwest Region.

According to media, on June 3, suspected separatists abducted PCC pastor Theophilus Nyamdon Gwandikang in Batibo. A video on social media reportedly showed the pastor in handcuffs and shirtless on a wooden bed as separatists accused him of being a government spy. The separatists threatened to kill him unless his church paid 2.5 million CFA francs (\$4,700). According to social media reports, the pastor was released a few days later after the Presbyterian Church paid the ransom.

Reverend Daniel Ache of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Kumbo in the Northwest Region said that on October 20, suspected separatists abducted at least four local parishioners during a pilgrimage to pray for peace in the Anglophone regions. The abduction took place in an area where separatists repeatedly clashed with government forces since 2017. He said separatists abducted some of the Christians in the morning after a prayer service at a local church on a walk to Kumbo Cathedral to attend Mass. According to Ache, after the Mass, parishioners marched to the separatist camp nearby and demanded and secured the release of most of the abductees.

On February 22, Reverend Godwill Chiatoh Ncham of the CBC stated that unidentified armed men vandalized churches and destroyed church property in separate incidents in Jack, Ngang, and Mbui in the Northwest Region over three days in February.

The Cameroon Association for Interreligious Dialogue (ACADIR) collaborated with administrative, traditional, and religious authorities to establish local ACADIR branches in the subdivisions of Pete and Bogo in the Far North Region and a divisional office in Yagoua. ACADIR includes the Cameroon National Episcopal Conference, Cameroon Council of Protestant Churches, Yaounde Orthodox Archdiocese, Higher Islamic Council of Cameroon, and Cameroon Islamic Cultural Association. According to ACADIR, these actions aimed to promote interreligious dialogue and mobilize religious leaders on issues such as peaceful coexistence and development.

In June and August, ACADIR organized interreligious seminars in the West, Northwest, and Southwest Regions. During the seminars, leaders from diverse religious groups trained “peace ambassadors” to promote peace, social cohesion, and human rights and foster mutual understanding among members of different faith-based organizations.

According to PCC pastor Gustav Ebai, in March the leaders of diverse Christian denominations and Muslim authorities collaborated with UNICEF to share ideas on appropriate messaging by religious groups within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Roman Catholic leader Father Ache said that although the number of attacks by Anglophone separatists against religious leaders in the Northwest Region significantly decreased compared with 2019, such attacks continued during the year and contributed to a climate of fear. He said while there were few restrictions on worship, fear of separatists and security forces often made individuals afraid to leave their homes to attend church services. Ache said an annual celebration of Christian unity in Kumbo, characterized by joint services involving different religious groups and visits by Christians of different faiths to other denominations, did not take place because of violence between separatists and security forces.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials discussed with government officials the failure to register faith-based organizations. The embassy also discussed the perception by Pentecostal churches that the government was biased in favor of Catholic and traditional Protestant Churches. The embassy underlined the effect of the sociopolitical crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions on freedom of worship as well as the importance of interfaith dialogue with government officials, including regional delegations from the Ministry of Social Affairs and the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms.

Embassy officials discussed interreligious dialogue and the impact of COVID-19 on religious freedom and training with leaders from Christian and Muslim communities, including the leader of Caritas-Kumbo, a local branch of the Catholic relief and development agency in the Northwest Region; the national president of the High Islamic Council in Cameroon; the coordinator of ACADIR; and a representative of the Pentecostal grouping Sunrise Pastors' Council. Embassy officers also discussed the negative impact on religious freedom of the violence in the Anglophone regions.

On August 11, the embassy issued a press release that condemned the killing of pastor and humanitarian worker Christopher Fon Tanjoh on August 7, highlighted the insecurity in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, and called for an independent investigation into the killing.

Throughout the year, the embassy promoted religious freedom as a fundamental human right on its social media platforms.

ecoi.net summary:



Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2020)

Country:

Cameroon

Source:

USDOS – US Department of State

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/cameroon/>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

12 May 2021

Document ID:

2051530

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