



2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Cameroon

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Executive Summary

The constitution stipulates the state is secular, prohibits religious harassment, and provides for freedom of religion and worship. During the year, the government implemented a series of measures in response to repeated attacks from Boko Haram. Some of the measures restricted religious expression and customs, such as the wearing of religious clothing and access to religious education. A Muslim woman reported she and her relative were physically abused by a gendarme officer for wearing the full-face veil. After two suicide bombers dressed in burqas killed 13 people, several regional governors banned the garment. Authorities carried out a census of Quranic schools in the Far North Region, with media reporting the purpose was to find and close schools that were teaching extremist ideologies. Although the government did not close any school explicitly for this reason, it did advise Quranic schools to refrain from enrolling children of unknown parentage or unknown families, due to Boko Haram's use of children as suicide bombers. Some Muslims said they were prohibited by local authorities from preaching in public places or distributing religious literature, as other denominations do.

A dispute between rivals to lead a Christian church turned violent and the government arrested the men and closed the church, at least temporarily. Muslims reported being subjected to stigmatization and discrimination, and some said they were wrongly perceived as supporting Boko Haram. Some Muslim leaders said a government campaign reduced the level of stigmatization and discrimination. Many prominent religious leaders, including the imam of the Douala Central Mosque, the imam of the Yaounde Central Mosque, and the Catholic Archbishop of Yaounde spoke out against Boko Haram, its attacks against security forces and civilians, its use of children to conduct attacks, and its efforts to elicit support from the local Muslim population.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom issues with government officials, advocating for greater transparency and efficiency in the registration process for 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 and intolerance. Embassy officers conducted outreach among religious groups, promoting religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue by organizing one-on-one meetings and hosting dinners with religious leaders from various denominations. The embassy also hosted a roundtable discussion on interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance and sponsored a workshop on countering religious extremism.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 23.7 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2005 census, the most recent available, 69 percent of the population is Christian, 21 percent Muslim, 6 percent animist, and less than 5 percent Jews and Bahais. Of Christians, approximately 38 percent are Roman Catholic, 26 percent Protestant, 4 percent other Christian denominations, including Jehovah's Witnesses, and less than 1 percent Orthodox Christian. There are growing numbers of Christian revivalist churches.

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 in general the population in this area is fairly evenly divided among 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. 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. 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. 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. In practice 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.

Government Practices

During the year, in response to repeated attacks from Boko Haram the government implemented a series of measures which restricted religious expression and customs.

Members of the Muslim community in Bamenda reported that during a highway roadblock in Sagba (Northwest Region) on August 12, a Muslim woman named Modestine Yida Mbukwe and her 13-year-old relative, Njag Rashida, were physically abused by a gendarme officer because they were wearing religious headscarves. Mbukwe said that the gendarme insulted and tried to remove her veil by force. Mbukwe said that a Catholic nun who was passing by with a much longer head covering was allowed to continue on her way unchallenged. The Muslim woman filed a complaint with the Bamenda military tribunal on August 13. The matter remained pending as of the end of the year.

Following raids carried out in a number of Quranic schools in Guirvidig, Far North Region, security forces arrested approximately 130 children. Eighty-four of the youngest children were sent to a government-sponsored juvenile detention center in Maroua, while the others were reported placed in custody at Maroua Central Prison. By November, authorities released the 84 youngest children. There were no definitive reports on the whereabouts of the remaining children. Local authorities accused the schools of recruiting children for Boko Haram, although they did not file formal charges against them. According to a June 19 report by Amnesty International, all but three of the children were 14 or under, 47 were under 10, and some were as young as five years old. Civil society organizations stated that they viewed the arrest and prolonged detention as a violation of human rights, including the right to religious teaching.

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 16 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 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, hundreds more operated without official government authorization.

In mid-July, Governor Midjiyawa Bakari of the Far North Region banned the wearing of the full-face Islamic veil after two women suicide bombers dressed in the religious garment killed at least 13 people in Fotokol. Governors of other regions, including the West and East, followed with similar decisions. On December 15, the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences of the Yaounde University banned collective prayers and wearing of veils on campus.

In the Far North Region, government authorities carried out a census of Quranic schools, reportedly with the intention of identifying and closing any schools deemed to be teaching extremist ideology. Although no schools were closed for this reason, authorities reportedly instructed some school administrators to refrain from enrolling nonlocal children or children of unknown or unfamiliar families, due to Boko Haram's use of such children to carry out suicide attacks.

Members of the Mbororo community, a minority indigenous group that is predominantly Muslim, complained of disparate treatment by authorities. On October 26, officials of the Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association in Bamenda, Northwest Region, said that Mbororo cattle herders have been subjected to increased discrimination since the beginning of Boko Haram

attacks. They reported that when a Mbororo cattle herder was found with a knife, the knife was seized and the owner had to pay at least CFA 10, 000 (\$16.60) to be released. The group reported that members of other religious groups were allowed to carry knives. The group also said they could not preach or distribute religious literature in the market, but that other religious denominations were permitted to do so.

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.

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 Non-State Actors

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. The insurgents burned down places of worship. 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 thousands.

On February 4, Boko Haram carried out a coordinated attack in Fotokol, killing several dozen civilians including at least 30 in mosques, one of whom was the imam of the principal mosque. They set the principal mosque on fire. During the October attack on Kerawa, Boko Haram fighters also killed several Muslims who were attending prayer sessions in mosques. Some civilians were also kidnapped during the attacks.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Conflict occurred between members of a traditional community and members of a Cameroon Baptist Union church in Baba I Village, Ngoketunja Division, Northwest Region. In October, Pastor Komando Ivo reported that four members of a traditional society (local phrasing for an animist-based religious group) attacked his parishioners during a worship session. The traditional ruler of the community, however, stated that the four traditionalists had been forced into the church by parishioners. Church members reportedly beat the four villagers and sprinkled acid in their eyes. According to a local paper, the four members of the traditional society and most villagers believed that the Baptist church was disrespectful of the traditions of the village by reportedly engaging in late-night worship and in behavior that was responsible for an upsurge of the number of pregnancies and divorces in the village. Following the incident, both the villagers and the church filed complaints against each other; authorities allowed the church to continue its activities but ordered it to address the "root causes" of the traditional villagers' complaints. Church members say they fear reprisal from the village community.

In several instances, disputes within religious communities over church personnel and church management prevented the holding of worship or resulted in the temporary closure of churches. Churches affected include Evangelical Church of Cameroon, parishes in the Douala neighborhoods of Akwa and Bonapriso, and a Presbyterian Church in Cameroon parish in Douala.

In the latter instance, the police intervened after a physical altercation during a worship service and detained three pastors for three days.

On October 18, in Douala 5th District, Littoral Region, authorities closed the Beedi parish of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (EPC), following a fight between Bikai Robert Cyril and Mbayen Alain Claude, each of whom claimed to be the rightful pastor. According to reports, the EPC removed Mbayen from his position in 2014 but he resisted, leading local authorities to close the church from July 2014 to August 2015. After the church reopened, Bikai reportedly was scheduled to be installed on October 18, but Mbayen and his followers again entered the church leading to a physical altercation. The police arrested Mbayen and Bikai, both of whom they detained for three days. The parish was once again closed and EPC authorities were called upon to find a lasting solution to the issue. The church remained closed as of the end of November.

On October 26, Muslims in Bamenda, Northwest Region, reported that other members of their community sometimes used pejorative language to refer to them, such as "less developed," "less enlightened," or potential "Boko Haram."

Muslim leaders and organizations, including the Coordinator of the Council of Imams and Religious Dignitaries of Cameroon (CIDIMUC), and the Chairperson of the Cameroon Council of Imams, Mosques, and Islamic Affairs expressed support for the burqa bans, which they considered a measure to protect everyone, including Muslims. Other Muslims, including those in the predominantly Muslim neighborhood of Briqueterie (in Yaounde) and members of the Muslim community in the city of Bamenda, reportedly viewed the decision as a restriction of their religious expression and customs, and a vehicle for stigmatization and discrimination.

Many prominent religious leaders and organizations spoke out against Boko Haram, its attacks against Cameroonian security forces, and its attempts to elicit support for those attacks from local populations. In June CIDIMUC, a civil society organization aimed at promoting interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance, organized a Muslim prayer session for the eradication of Boko Haram. Leaders of other religious denominations, including the Catholic Archbishop of Yaounde, addressed the issue of Boko Haram in their sermons, and most political leaders spoke out against Boko Haram, praising the Muslim community for rejecting the violent extremist message of Boko Haram.

On September 21, the Yaounde Catholic Basilica, CIDIMUC, and the Cameroon Association for Interreligious Dialogue, another civil society organization, organized an interfaith event to promote religious tolerance and advocate against religious extremism.

On October 20, religious leaders from the various denominations, including Muslims imams, Catholic priests, Presbyterian pastors, Pentecostals and others, came together to organize an interfaith service in Yaounde, in memory of those who perished in a stampede that occurred during this year's pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia. Participants used the opportunity to preach religious tolerance and underscored the negative consequences of religious extremism.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy regularly discussed religious freedom and importance of interfaith dialogue with government officials. In interactions with the government, embassy officials advocated for greater transparency and efficiency in approving the status of religious groups. Embassy officials also raised the issue of stigmatization of and discrimination against the Muslim community.

Embassy officers met with prominent figures from the Christian and Muslim communities, including the Coordinator of CIDIMUC, the Archbishop of the Mvolye Basilica, the Secretary General of the Islamic Union of Cameroon, the Chairperson of the Cameroon Council of Imams,

Mosques, and Islamic Affairs, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, the Papal Nuncio, and the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Douala, among other religious leaders. Those conversations included discussions on promoting religious tolerance. The embassy underscored the United States' commitment to interfaith dialogue and cooperation in the face of rising threats from Boko Haram at these events.

On August 6, the embassy organized a roundtable of 20 youth leaders from various religious denominations, including Muslims, Christians, and indigenous groups to promote tolerance. Participants discussed the basis of their faiths, responded to queries and misconceptions about their faiths and identified common ideals. The participants agreed on a set of actions for future engagement, including organizing interfaith youth visits, drafting a youth interfaith declaration, and quarterly meetings.

Also in August the U.S. embassy funded a workshop on combatting religious extremism bringing together fifty leaders of youth associations in the Far North Region.

In September the Ambassador hosted an event for religious leaders to underscore the United States' commitment to interfaith dialogue and cooperation. The religious leaders said they welcomed the opportunity to strengthen the interfaith dialogue and discussions to combat religious extremism.

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