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USDOS – US Department of State

2017 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. During the year, the government implemented a series of measures that it stated it took to preserve order within religious groups undergoing internal disputes. These included instances of internal disputes within Christian communities over the creation of new ecclesiastical districts and the election of church leaders that prompted the government to suspend elected executives and install provisional administrations in some communities. The death under suspicious circumstances of a Roman Catholic bishop and lawsuits against some clerics led some religious leaders to claim harassment. Authorities threatened but did not act to close down unauthorized religious groups in the Center Region. In a number of instances, security forces intervened to enable worship services to take place in spite of opposition from disgruntled factions within some religious communities. The government did not authorize any new religious groups, although many submitted requests. Authorities did not officially lift but also did not enforce the ban on full-face Islamic veils implemented in the Far North Region after July 2015 terrorist attacks.

Boko Haram carried out a series of violent attacks, including suicide bombings against civilians, government officials, and military forces, and harassed and intimidated populations in the Far North Region. Attacks on civilians included suicide bombings in mosques, killings and kidnappings of Muslims and Christians, and theft and destruction of property, including arson. The insurgents attacked places of worship and private homes. According to reports, Boko Haram killed at least 300 civilians, police, military personnel, and gendarmes between January and October.

Protracted leadership struggles in some Christian communities often prevented the holding of worship services, and on at least one occasion led to the suspension of elected church leaders. Although many individuals continued to associate Boko Haram with Islam, certain imams stated that stigmatization of Muslims was decreasing.

U.S. embassy officers discussed religious freedom issues, including the importance of interfaith dialogue, with government officials and leading figures from the principal religious groups. The embassy continued to discuss the dangers of inter and intrareligious intolerance and the importance of interfaith dialogue in one-on-one meetings and youth training sessions.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 25 million (July 2017 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 other religions, and 3.2 percent report no religious affiliation. Of Christians, approximately 55.5 percent are Roman Catholic, 38 percent Protestant, and 6.5 percent other Christian denominations, including Jehovah's Witnesses and Orthodox churches. 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 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 unauthorized 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, 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 and Decentralization (MINATD). The MINATD reviews the file and sends it to the presidency with a recommendation to approve or deny. Authorization may 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.

The 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 and leaders of the Catholic Church disagreed about the circumstances surrounding the death of Bishop Jean Marie Benoit Bala of the Diocese of Bafia. On June 2, his body was recovered from the Sanaga River after his car was found on the bridge with a note inside stating, “I am in the water.” On June 13, the National Episcopal Council of Cameroon (NECC) declared the Bishop had been brutally murdered. The NECC challenged the results of an official autopsy, which stated that the Bishop probably drowned, given that there were no signs of violence on his body. On July 4, the attorney general also released a statement at the Central Appeal Court stating, “Drowning is the most probable cause of death of the Bishop.” On July 10, the NECC stated in a public statement, based on what it said was moral certitude, “the corpse which was recovered from the river and identified as his, bore marks of violence.” Bala’s death followed a series of killings of Roman Catholic clergymen since the 1980s. Bishop Abraham Kome, appointed as administrator of the Diocese of Bafia following Bala’s death, said during a homily that people in positions of power killed Bala because he stood against homosexual activity. On August 4, NECC President Archbishop Samuel Kleda said the controversy surrounding the Bishop’s death had significantly strained relations between the Church and the government. The NECC filed a private lawsuit against government officials for “mishandling the case.”

On September 17, security officers in Douala arrested the pastor of the Salvation for All Nations revivalist church following the death of Henriette Fagna, a parishioner who sought treatment from her pastor after falling ill. The pastor initiated a healing service on her behalf, but her condition deteriorated, and she was eventually taken to a health facility where she later died. Authorities charged the pastor with her death, stating the pastor’s actions delayed medical intervention until it was too late.

On August 8, the newly appointed governor of the Center Region, Paul Naseri Bea, announced the closure of unauthorized revivalist churches, citing public order and health concerns, especially nighttime noise that disturbed residents. The authorities, however, did not implement his order or close any churches.

The government intervened on several occasions in protracted leadership crises within Christian groups, such as the Cameroon Evangelical Church (CEC) and the Cameroonian Presbyterian Church (EPC). In July the courts suspended the president and other executives of the CEC, who had been elected in April. In February the Divisional Officer of Mvila, South Region, placed five parishes of the CPC under the temporary administration of its General Assembly. In both cases, the government stated it took this measure to preserve order and encourage a solution and reconciliation among those involved. Various factions of the two denominations accused the government of administrative bias and judicial discrimination.

On June 25, security officers dispersed a group of persons attempting to disrupt Islamic prayers marking the end of Ramadan in Ngaoundere, Adamawa Region. The group that attempted the disruption stated that the traditional Muslim ruler (*Lamido*) and the governor had wrongfully expelled 48 families from the prayer site in May after public authorities granted the land to them. The governor said the state owned the land in question and granted the Muslim community access after an official request. Gendarmes arrested six protesters.

The government again took no action to adjudicate applications for legal status 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. According to the MINATD, incomplete application submissions and lengthy background investigations contributed to delays. Although, by law, groups must register, the government continued to allow hundreds of unauthorized small religious groups to operate freely under its policy of “administrative tolerance.” Forty-seven religious groups continued to be legally authorized at year’s end.

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 each subsidy was proportional to the size of the student body.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Boko Haram continued committing acts of mass violence in its quest to impose its religious and political beliefs. Boko Haram perpetrated numerous attacks, sometimes directly targeting places of worship. For example, on September 13, a young girl walked into the Sanda-Wadjiri mosque in Kolofata and set off an explosive that killed five worshippers during morning prayers. Boko Haram perpetrated multiple and indiscriminate killings of civilians – Muslim and Christian alike – and of government officials and military personnel. In addition, insurgents kidnapped civilians and set residences on fire. On September 5, Amnesty International released a report stating that Boko Haram suicide bombers had killed 158 civilians in the country between April and September.

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. In March troops from the country’s Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), alongside Nigerian forces, freed several localities, including Siyara, Kote, Sigawa Tchatiqe, and Lamukura, in the border region under Boko Haram control.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Mfombam Memouna said her father Mfomban Aboubakar, who opposed her conversion from Islam to Christianity, forcibly transported her from her residence in Yaounde to a mosque in Douala following her conversion, where she was beaten, forced to recite Quranic verses and inhale certain fumes. She said Aboubakar demanded her to renounce her conversion. Although she escaped back to Yaounde, her father continued to threaten her in an attempt to compel her to renounce Christianity. On October 12, Memouna submitted a complaint against her father to the attorney general of the Court of First Instance in Yaounde. At year’s end, she had yet to receive a response.

In March a “Consortium of Parents” filed lawsuits against Catholic, Presbyterian, and Baptist clergy who presided over denominational schools in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. Authorities subsequently charged the clerics with embezzlement, refusing to teach students, and jeopardizing national unity. Observers stated the charges were perceived as a disguised government attack, since the accusations were made following a communique on February 9 in which the clergymen jointly called on

the government to “pursue frank dialogue with agitating Anglophone leaders” and pointed out that the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions “resulted from an underlying and unsolved political problem.” Church leaders in these regions made clear their conviction that the government was behind the charges filed against them, which they said stemmed from a school boycott conducted by Anglophone strikers that began in November 2016. The consortium filed the lawsuit after strikers closed most schools in these regions due to perceived marginalization of the Anglophone community. On September 25, the attorneys general of the respective regional courts of appeal dropped all charges against the clerics.

In April members of the CEC elected as president Reverend Jean Samuel Hendje Toya, but a faction of the CEC protested and filed a lawsuit on May 23, saying the election was rigged. In 2009 members had agreed their next president would be of Sawa ethnicity, and some rejected Toya for not meeting this criterion or because they had pledged their allegiance to Toya’s rival, Reverend Priso MOUNGOLE. Demonstrations and interruptions of church services ensued, and on July 21, the Court of First Instance in Wouri, Littoral Region, suspended the installation of those elected in April. Toya’s supporters denounced this decision, which was upheld on appeal, and rejected the authority of the state to adjudicate in internal disputes of the CEC.

On April 2, a faction of the CPC in Abong-Mbang, East Region, attempted to prevent the reopening of the Nkol-Mvolan Chapel by removing the cross, palms, altar cloth, and other religious objects and setting up barricades. Security forces intervened, the chapel reopened, and worship took place. The Nkol-Mvolan and Mbama chapels had been closed since 2014 following a dispute among those who created the Nkol-Mvolan Jerusalem parish to replace the Nkol-Mvolan parish, an initiative the CPC leadership opposed.

On February 21, the senior divisional officer for Mvila, South Region, Victor Marcel Mendel Ngangue, endorsed the decision reached by the opposing factions of the EPC. During a meeting over which he presided, they arrived at a consensus, and he placed five disputed parishes of the EPC in Ebolowa, the capital of South Region, under the provisional administration of the General Assembly of the church.

On June 7, Bishop Dibo Thomas Babyngton Elango of the Anglican Church of Cameroon addressed accusations made in 2016 that he gave preferential treatment to Nigerian clergymen. Elango stated that most parishes in the country were fledgling and consequently required outside help, including from Nigerians.

Many prominent religious leaders as well as various organizations spoke out against Boko Haram and violent extremism. On June 25, during prayers marking the end of Ramadan, the president of the Council of Imams and Religious Dignitaries of Cameroon (CIDIMUC) called on Muslims to reject terrorism and denounce Boko Haram’s radical extremism. Once a month, one imam in the Southwest Region publicly denounced Boko Haram and religious extremists.

In July, during the 11th assembly of the Association of Episcopal Conferences of the Central Africa Region in Yaounde, Catholic priests and clergy from other religious groups condemned religious fundamentalism and promoted dialogue and mutual acceptance when discussing differences of belief. On October 3 and 4, the UN Development Program organized a workshop in Maroua, Far North Region, which sensitized students and teachers of Quranic schools on the prevention of violent extremism, citizenship, and mutual acceptance. On September 10, the Diocese of Ebolowa held an interreligious service to promote peaceful coexistence between the Catholic Church and practitioners of traditional African beliefs and customs. This involved discussions between the bishop and local traditional leaders, which addressed myths and stereotypes, as well as “suspicions, prejudices, and ambiguities” that had characterized relations between their communities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom and 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 officers met with leaders from the Christian and Muslim communities, including the Archbishop of Douala, who is president of the NECC and president of the Association of Episcopal Conferences of the Central Africa Region; the national coordinator of CIDIMUC; the president of the Islamic Union of Cameroon; and the Archbishop of the Anglican Church in Cameroon. The conversations focused on preventing violent extremism related to religion and promoting freedom of worship. They also focused on promoting religious tolerance and peacebuilding. The embassy underscored the commitment of the U.S. to interfaith dialogue and cooperation in the face of threats by Boko Haram.

The U.S. government funded several projects in the Far North Region concerning religious freedom. In December local NGO Cameroon Association for Interreligious Dialogue (ACADIR) convened 169 female religious leaders for three days to share experiences and jointly elaborate an action plan to counter violent extremism and address interreligious conflicts. Fifty-one male leaders joined them on the final day. In July the NGO Public Concern, implemented two workshops related to countering violent extremism connected to religion, bringing together 60 community leaders from four divisions. In March ACADIR held a program entitled “Sensitizing Youth of Different Religious Backgrounds on Violent Extremism in the Far North,” involving 256 youth, including 64 girls, from four villages.

Additionally, the U.S. government funded a two-year project in the North and Far North Regions that concentrated on improving cohesion in communities at risk of violent extremist attack or recruitment. The project supported and trained staff of community radio stations to produce radio programs in local languages about religious tolerance,

interreligious dialogue, and interreligious conflict. Project partner ACADIR assisted with organizing community events that bolstered social cohesion and provided the project with a network of moderate religious leaders who were featured on the radio programs.

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