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2018 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. Religious leaders stated that security forces battling armed Anglophone separatists in the Northwest and Southwest Regions killed three clerics. On several occasions, Christians in these two regions complained that security forces interrupted church services and prevented them from accessing places of worship. On January 18, soldiers reportedly burned down the presbytery of St. Paul's Catholic Church, Kwa-Kwa, Southwest Region. During the year, the government implemented a series of measures that it stated were to preserve order within religious groups undergoing internal disputes. These included disputes over the creation of new ecclesiastical districts and the election of church leaders in which the government suspended elected executives and temporarily closed down certain places of worship. For the eighth straight year, the government did not authorize any new religious groups, and many requests remained pending. Some religious leaders said the government deliberately withheld authorizations in order to maintain leverage over religious organizations.

Boko Haram continued to carry out 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 invasions of mosques, church burnings, killings and kidnappings of Muslims and Christians, and theft and destruction of property, including arson. The insurgents attacked places of worship and private homes. The government initiated communication campaigns aimed at curbing radical extremism and reintegrating former Boko Haram fighters.

On two separate occasions, unidentified gunmen in the Southwest Region killed a local chief in a church and assassinated a priest, reportedly because of their opposition to the separatist movement in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest Regions. Separatists in these two regions threatened pastors, kidnapped priests, and sometimes limited Christians' ability to attend services. There were reports that more than 90 students were kidnapped from Presbyterian schools in two incidents in October and November. A traditional council banned activities of a Pentecostal church in the Northwest Region. Protracted leadership struggles in some Christian communities

sometimes prevented the holding of religious services. Muslim and Christian leaders initiated interfaith activities aimed at promoting interreligious dialogue and peaceful coexistence of different faiths.

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 organized an interactive workshop on the importance of interfaith dialogue in promoting social cohesion and religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 25.6 million (July 2018 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. 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 the Christians, this report 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 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 entity 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 (MINAT). The MINAT reviews the file and sends it to the presidency with a recommendation to approve or deny. Authorization is 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 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 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

The Catholic Bishop of Mamfe Diocese, Andrew Nkea, stated that on November 21, soldiers of the National Gendarmerie killed Reverend Cosmas Omboto Ondari, the parochial vicar of the St. Martin’s of Tours Parish, Kembong, Southwest Region, in front of the church building. The bishop stated that, according to eyewitness reports, gendarmes fired at random from their passing vehicle, killing Ondari as he tried to escape the gunfire. Nkea said that when he visited the parish the next day, he counted 21 bullet holes in the church door and saw the blood of the dead priest at the entrance. The Minister of Communication at the time, Issa Tchiroma Barkary, said the killing was not done by the military, and Minister of Defense Joseph Beti Assomo accused Anglophone separatists of killing the priest and trying to discredit the defense forces.

According to the Catholic Archbishop of Bamenda, Cornelius Fontem Esua, on October 4, unidentified soldiers shot and killed 19-year-old Catholic seminarian Akiata Gerard Anjiangwe in front of St. Therese Church in Bameasing, Northwest Region. In an October 5 press statement, Archbishop Esua accused the country’s military of killing the seminarian while he made preparations for worship services the next day. According to Archbishop Esua, a military truck drove up to the church and soldiers immediately

began shooting. Worshippers on the premises ran into the rectory and blocked the door while Anjiangwe knelt in front of the church and began praying the rosary. Esua said the soldiers shot the seminarian three times.

The family of Ghanaian pastor Isaac Attoh of Destiny Impact Ministry, Accra, stated government security forces shot and killed Attoh on June 14 in Batibo, Northwest Region, where the army and Anglophone secessionists repeatedly clashed during the year. According to his family, Attoh had travelled from Ghana to Cameroon, where he headed one of the branches of Destiny Impact Ministry. Attoh's family accused the government of trying to cover up the killing by rapidly burying his body without their consent.

In September the trial of Prisca Abomo, a self-proclaimed prophet, and Marie Madjou began. The two were accused of murder and detained in 2016 after a child died during a faith healing session they conducted in Douala, Littoral Region. Sources stated the lengthy pretrial period was due to administrative delays and the frequent absences of the judges and accusers. In December the courts declared Abomo and Madjou innocent.

Residents of the village of Kwa-Kwa, Southwest Region, said that following intense clashes with Anglophone separatists on January 18, security forces occupying Kwa-Kwa burned down the rectory of St. Paul's Catholic Church. The army blamed the act on "Anglophone terrorists."

Parishioners of Saint Kizito's Catholic Church, Bamenda, Northwest Region, stated soldiers entered the church on October 7 and compelled 26 Christians preparing for Sunday worship to return to their homes. They also confronted the priest who came to celebrate Mass and ordered him off the church premises. On the same day, soldiers turned back worshippers on their way to St. Paul's Church in Nkwen neighborhood, Bamenda. The soldiers said they were enforcing a ban ordered by the governor of the Northwest Region on all assemblies of more than four persons during a 48-hour period before and after the October 7 presidential election.

The courts intervened on several occasions in protracted leadership crises within Christian groups, such as the Cameroonian Evangelical Church (CEC) and the Cameroonian Presbyterian Church (CPC). On June 6, the Littoral Regional Court of Appeal confirmed a 2017 court ruling that suspended the CEC's national leadership council elected in April 2017. On June 20, a group of Christians blocked the entrance to a CEC church in Douala and demanded the termination of the activities of the national leadership council. In April 2017, CEC members had elected Reverend Jean Samuel Hendje Toya as president, but a faction of CEC members protested and filed a lawsuit in May 2017, saying the election had been rigged. Demonstrations and interruptions of church service ensued, and in July 2017, the Court of First Instance in Wouri, Littoral Region, suspended the installation of those elected in April 2017. Toya's supporters criticized interference by the courts in the CEC's internal disputes and appealed the decision, which the Littoral Region's appellate court upheld in June 2018. Toya's faction appealed the decision at the Supreme Court.

Dissenting groups within the CPC failed to reach consensus in January when the CPC's General Assembly reaffirmed a controversial decision the previous year to split the Ntem consistory (administrative unit) in Ebolowa, South Region, into three separate consistories, without consulting parishioners. The two sides went to court, and the CPC's General Assembly asked the court to seal the churches under the authority of the disputed Ntem consistory until a verdict was reached. The courts subsequently shut down several CPC churches in March. Worshipers who could no longer access the shuttered churches organized religious services in makeshift tents or in the open. In 2017 the government had placed the disputed parishes under the temporary administration of the CPC General Assembly.

The government again took no action to adjudicate applications for authorization 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. The MINAT again stated that 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.” Unauthorized churches often circumvented administrative delays by associating with registered religious groups, under whose umbrella they operated. Such churches, however, technically remained unregistered. Some religious leaders said the government deliberately withheld legal status in order to maintain significant leverage over unregistered groups, which it could threaten to ban at any time. 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 and ISIS West Africa (ISIS/WA) continued to commit acts of mass violence within the Far North Region in their quest to impose their religious and political beliefs. Boko Haram perpetrated numerous attacks, sometimes directly targeting places of worship. On January 15, Boko Haram terrorists attacked Roum village, killed four persons, and set two churches on fire. On February 4, Boko Haram killed five Christians and set on fire a church building in Gitawa village. On February 23, Boko Haram killed one person and set on fire a Catholic church in Virkaza. On May 2, eight Boko Haram militants invaded a mosque in Mabanda village during prayers and killed at least 14 worshippers.

In June members of the Multinational Joint Task Force launched a communication campaign that involved promoting education and working with local religious leaders to combat Boko Haram’s ideology.

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.

On August 12, unidentified armed men interrupted a Sunday service at the Baptist church in Ekondo-Titi village, Southwest Region, and forcibly removed the traditional ruler, Chief Isoh Itoh, whom they shot and killed. Although no group claimed responsibility for the act, many local residents attributed it to Anglophone separatists because of Isoh’s perceived allegiance to the ruling party and his opposition to separatists’ quest for the secession of the Northwest and Southwest Regions.

On July 20, unidentified armed men shot and killed Catholic priest Alexander Sob Nougi in Muyuka, Southwest Region. His bishop, Emmanuel Bushu of the Diocese of Buea, dismissed suggestions that a stray bullet killed Sob Nougi during an exchange between the army and Anglophone separatists. Bushu said two unknown individuals had been sitting with Sob Nougi prior to the shooting and that autopsy reports indicated the killer shot Sob Nougi at point blank range, using an assault rifle fitted with a silencer. Although no one claimed responsibility for Sob Nougi’s killing, the national coordinator of the Catholic Church’s Justice and Peace Service, Isaac Justin Mabouth, attributed it to Anglophone separatists. He said Sob Nougi became a target when he ignored separatists’ calls for a school boycott in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. As the diocese’s education secretary, Sob Nougi reportedly spoke out against the school boycott and urged students to attend class. A nongovernmental organization leader based in the Southwest Region stated that soldiers of the Rapid Intervention Brigade apparently killed Sob Nougi, whom they suspected of providing assistance to separatists.

In October an American missionary was killed after being caught in crossfire in Bamenda, Northwest Region. There were no reports of any connection to the victim’s vocation or nationality but rather reports that this was a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Armed Anglophone separatists stormed a Presbyterian school in Bamenda, Northwest Region, on November 5. The head of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon and the Council of the Protestant Churches of Cameroon reported the total number kidnapped was 79 children and three adults and added that 11 students had also been kidnapped on October 31. He said the Presbyterian Church had decided to close all its schools in the two Anglophone regions as result of this incident.

Unidentified armed men entered St. Bede’s College in Kom, Northwest Region, on April 30 and abducted the principal of the school, Reverend William Neba, while he was celebrating Mass in the chapel. On May 2, the Catholic Archdiocese of Bamenda

announced his release. St. Bede's and other Catholic schools suspended operations thereafter, just weeks before the academic year officially ended. This led to media speculation that Anglophone separatists kidnapped Neba because St. Bede's College had not respected calls for a school boycott in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest Regions. According to media reports, the kidnappers released Neba when Catholic authorities agreed to shut down their schools immediately.

According to media reports, in November Anglophone separatists kidnapped three Franciscan sisters and 13 novices who were traveling in the Northwest Region. A source from the diocese in Kumbo stated the kidnapping occurred because the kidnappers saw the church as supportive of a peace conference convened by a Catholic cardinal. The kidnappers released the women the following day to representatives of the diocese.

On April 25 in Bangolan village, Northwest Region, the village council shuttered the local church building of Christian Missionary Fellowship International (CMFI), which it accused of violating local customs, and banned the group from proselytism. The traditional council clashed with the church over the burial ceremony of a CMFI member who had purportedly joined CMFI shortly before he died. During the funeral, Kennedy Ndigwa, the younger brother of the dead man, attacked the traditional council's delegate who came to perform funeral rites. Ndigwa stated that his brother had joined CMFI and had abandoned traditional rites. Immediately after this incident, the traditional council announced the ban on the church's activities.

In August separatists threatened to stop the religious activities of Pentecostal pastor Johnson Souleymane in Northwest and Southwest Regions. Souleymane, coordinator of Omega Fire Ministry, had previously preached against violence and accused certain separatist fighters of rape, extortion, abduction, and murder. He said they pretended to fight for Anglophones while taking advantage of the situation for financial gain. After the separatists threatened him, Souleymane ceased his denunciations and said he had been misunderstood.

In September the national coordinator of the Catholic Church's Justice and Peace Service, Isaac Justin Mabouth, stated that Christians had deserted nearly all the Catholic parishes in Manyu division, Southwest Region. He said Anglophone separatists had stigmatized the Catholic Church as being opposed to the independence of the Northwest and Southwest Regions.

On June 6, Bishop Dibo Thomas B. Elango of the Anglican Church of Cameroon said that clashes between Anglophone separatists and security forces significantly interfered with Christians' freedom of worship. He stated that many Christians had fled conflict areas into the bushes, where they could not access places of worship, and he accused both sides of targeting members of the clergy.

On February 1, the Association for Interreligious Dialogue (ACADIR) organized an interfaith prayer partly aimed at promoting the peaceful coexistence of different religious communities. During the year, ACADIR set up six divisional branches for the training of 300 "peace ambassadors" to promote interreligious dialogue and tolerance. On July 3, Muslim leaders organized a public conference in Yaounde, Center Region, at

which Congolese Muslim theologian Kasogbia Abdoul Madjid emphasized peaceful coexistence and stated there was no link between Islam and extremist violence. In a similar conference in Douala, Littoral Region, he characterized diversity in religious beliefs as “the will of God.” In April the Catholic Diocese of Maroua-Mokolo organized a series of sports competitions in which diverse religious communities participated, with the aim of promoting peace and interreligious dialogue.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. embassy discussed with government officials the effect of a violent, sociopolitical crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions on freedom of worship. The embassy also discussed the inability of religious bodies to receive official authorizations 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 coordinator of the Association for Interreligious Dialogue; the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon; the Catholic Archbishop of Douala, who was president of the Association of Episcopal Conferences of the Central African Region; and the Anglican Bishop of Cameroon. The conversations focused on preventing violent extremism related to religion and promoting freedom of worship, interreligious dialogue, religious diversity, and peacebuilding. The embassy underscored the commitment of the United States to interfaith dialogue and cooperation in the face of threats by Boko Haram and ISIS/WA.

The embassy, as part of its work to counter violent extremism in the Far North, engaged 160 female religious leaders in a workshop to address interreligious conflict. The workshop sought to reinforce interreligious exchanges, raise awareness on violent extremism related to religion, and develop an action plan to counter violent extremism at the community level. Women leaders from many denominations committed to work together without the distinction of religion to fight against violent extremism related to religion and its underlying social factors. The U.S. government also funded in-depth academic training on countering violent extremism related to religion for members of ACADIR.

On October 26, the embassy organized an interactive workshop that involved civil society and diverse faith-based organizations, including organizations sponsored by Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims. Participants brainstormed on the concepts of tolerance and peaceful coexistence and explored the government’s role in fostering religious freedom and the acceptance of religious diversity.

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