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2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - Cameroon

[Covers the period from July 1, 2008, to June 30, 2009]

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There were a few reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 183,568 square miles and a population of 18.1 million. Approximately 40 percent of the population is Christian, and 20 percent Muslim. The remaining 40 percent practices indigenous religious beliefs. The Christian population is divided between Roman Catholics (27 percent of the total population) and Protestants (13 percent). The largest Protestant groups are Presbyterians and evangelicals, while Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals represent fewer than 2 percent of Protestants. There is also a small community of Baha'is.

Muslims and Christians are found in every region, with Christians concentrated primarily in the southern and western regions. Large cities have significant populations of both groups. The two Anglophone provinces of the western region are largely Protestant, and the Francophone regions of the southern and western regions are mostly Catholic. In the northern regions, the locally dominant Fulani (or Peuhl) ethnic group is mainly Muslim, but the overall population is fairly evenly divided among Muslims, Christians, and followers of indigenous religious beliefs. The Bamoun ethnic group of the West Region is mostly Muslim. Indigenous religious beliefs are practiced in rural areas throughout the country but are rarely practiced publicly in cities, in part because many of these beliefs are intrinsically local in character.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution protects the right of individuals to choose and change their religion. The Government observes and enforces the right to practice the religion of one's choice, and any citizen has the right to sue the Government for the violation of any constitutionally guaranteed freedom.

The law does not restrict religious publishing or other religious media. The Catholic Church operates two of the few modern private printing presses and publishes a weekly newspaper, *L'Effort Camerounais*. These private printing presses also print several privately held secular newspapers. The state-sponsored television station and radio stations broadcast Christian and Islamic religious services on a regular basis, as well as religious ceremonies on national holidays and during national events.

The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Ascension Day, Assumption Day, Eid al-Fitr, Feast of the Lamb, and Christmas.

The Law on Religious Congregations governs relations between the Government and religious groups. The Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization (MINATD) must approve and register religious groups for them to function legally. It is illegal for a religious group to operate without official recognition; however, the law prescribes no specific penalties for violations, and numerous unregistered small religious groups operate freely.

To register, a religious denomination must legally qualify as a religious congregation. The definition includes "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 denomination then submits a file to MINATD. The file must include a request for authorization, a copy of the group's charter describing planned activities, and the names and functions of the group's officials. The Minister reviews the file and sends it to the Presidency with a recommendation to approve or deny. The President generally follows the recommendation of the Minister and grants authorization by a presidential decree. Although official recognition confers no general tax benefits, it allows religious groups to receive real estate as tax-free gifts for the conduct of their activities.

The MINATD, rather than the judiciary, primarily resolves disputes between or within registered religious groups about control of places of worship, schools, other real estate, or financial assets.

Several religious denominations operate primary and secondary schools. The law charges the Ministry of Basic Education and the Ministry of Secondary Education with ensuring that private schools run by religious groups meet the same standards as state-operated schools in terms of curriculum, infrastructure, and teacher training. For schools affiliated with religious groups, the Sub-Department of Confessional Education of the Department of Private Education performs this oversight function. Public schools do not incorporate religion into their curriculum. The Government gives an annual subsidy to all private primary and secondary education institutions, including those operated by religious denominations. There are also several religious universities around the country.

The practice of witchcraft, defined as any act of magic or divination liable to harm another person or property, is a criminal offense under the national penal code. The Government distinguishes between witchcraft and indigenous religious practice, and there were no cases of witchcraft trials that impinged upon indigenous religious belief.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

The Government does not register indigenous religious groups, stating that the practice of traditional religion is a private concern observed by members of a particular ethnic or kinship group or the residents of a particular locality.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were a few reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Established churches denounced new unaffiliated religious groups, most of which are Protestant, as "sects" or "cults," claiming that they were detrimental to societal peace and harmony. In practice, such denunciation did not inhibit the practice of the unaffiliated religious groups.

Christians and Muslims organized ecumenical ceremonies to pray and promote a spirit of tolerance and peace. During Pope Benedict XVI's March 2009 visit to the country, the Catholic Church (represented by the Episcopal Conference of Cameroon) organized a meeting between the Pope and Muslim leaders to emphasize peaceful coexistence.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met regularly with senior Christian and Muslim leaders, including women's groups, to express U.S. Government support for religious freedom.

A number of prominent religious and political leaders participated in International Visitor Leadership Programs dealing with religion. Most notably, religious and political leaders participated in a program entitled "Religion in the United States," which explained the core values of individual freedom of conviction, expression, and worship in U.S. society, the interplay between religion and politics in the United States and the role of religious leaders in the community. These leaders were able to use the knowledge acquired to promote interfaith dialogue in an effort to maintain the largely harmonious relationship between religions in this multireligious society.
