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2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Cameroon

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
July 30, 2012

[Covers calendar year from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011]

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious issues with government authorities, especially the role of churches in the health and educational systems of the country, the preservation of moral values, and concerns about extremism. Embassy officers held meetings with prominent figures from all religious groups throughout the country to discuss issues affecting those groups and hosted receptions and iftars (breaking of the fast during Ramadan) with members of different religious groups in attendance. The embassy organized conferences and debates with members of the Muslim community; religious freedom issues were among those discussed.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2005 census, 69 percent of the population is Christian, 21 percent Muslim, and 6 percent animist. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jews and Baha'is. As defined by the census, the Christian population is divided among Roman Catholics (38.4 percent of the total population), Protestants (26.3 percent), and other Christian denominations (4 percent), including Jehovah's Witnesses.

Muslims and Christians are found 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 of the country are largely Protestant, and the eight Francophone regions are mostly Catholic. In the northern regions, the dominant Fulani (or Peuhl) ethnic group is mainly Muslim, but the overall population in those regions is fairly evenly divided among Muslims, Christians, and followers of indigenous religions, who are mostly located in rural areas. The Bamoun ethnic group of the West Region is predominately Muslim.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The constitution provides for the right of individuals to choose, practice, and change their religion. The constitution also guarantees the right of any citizen to sue the government for the violation of any constitutionally protected freedom.

The Law on Religious Congregations governs relations between the government and religious groups. The Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization (MINATD) and the presidency 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.

In order to register, a religious group 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 religious group 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. MINATD reviews the file and sends it to the presidency with a recommendation to approve or deny. The president may then grant authorization by 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, allows missionaries to receive visas with longer validity, and permits public gathering and worship.

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. The government provides an annual subsidy to all private primary and secondary education institutions, including those operated by religious denominations. There were also several religious universities in the country.

The law does not restrict religious publishing or other religious media. The Catholic Church operates a private printing press and publishes a weekly newspaper, *L'Effort Camerounais*. This private printing press also prints several privately held secular newspapers.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Ascension Day, Assumption Day, Eid al-Fitr, Eid Al Adha, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The presidency has been slow to approve the legal status of a number of religious groups, including some from the United States, whose applications have been pending for years in several cases. 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.

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, which are often attended by government ministers or the president.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy discussed religious issues with government authorities, especially the role of churches in the health and educational systems of the country, the preservation of moral values, and concerns about extremism. Embassy officials also held meetings with prominent representatives from all principal religious groups. Topics of discussion included challenges to religious freedom, outreach among religious groups, religious tolerance, and administrative issues. U.S. embassy officials also discussed the slowness of the presidency to approve religious groups' status, with the result that, although individuals are free to worship, the religious organization does not enjoy the full rights prescribed by law. The embassy also hosted conferences, debates, and iftars with members of the Muslim community; religious freedom was among issues discussed.
