

# CAMEROON 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution establishes the state as secular, prohibits religious harassment, and provides for freedom of religion and worship. According to media, security officers combating Anglophone separatists in the Northwest and Southwest Regions killed Christians and clergymen and attacked places of worship. In April soldiers shot and killed a Baptist pastor on his way to church in Mfumte Village. In September soldiers shot and killed a woman outside the Roman Catholic church in Bambui. In May security forces set fire to a Protestant church during clashes with separatists in Bamenda, the Northwest Region's capital. In October security forces arrested a Catholic priest in Bamenda, reportedly because he accused soldiers of human rights abuses during an address to the United Nations, according to one of his colleagues. He was released a day later. Religious media outlets accused the government of arming Muslim herders and encouraging them to attack Christians in the town of Wum, and of exploiting sporadic clashes over land between Mbororo herders and local farmers, attempting to introduce a religious character to the conflict in the Northwest Region between security forces and separatists. In February police briefly detained a pastor of the Cameroon Evangelical Church (CEC) and accused him of inciting rebellion during a sermon. On several occasions, Christians in the Northwest and Southwest Regions said security forces interrupted church services and prevented them from accessing places of worship. During the year, the government appointed a board to manage the CEC's affairs. The government said it acted to preserve order within the CEC, which was undergoing an internal dispute over the election of Church leaders after the government suspended elected executives. Religious leaders expressed frustration with the government's failure to register any new religious groups for the ninth consecutive year and said many requests remained pending.

Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa (ISIS-WA) continued to carry out violent attacks against civilians, government officials, and military forces. Attacks on civilians included suicide bombings, church burnings, killings and kidnappings of Muslims and Christians, and theft and destruction of property, including arson. Insurgents attacked places of worship and private homes. Boko Haram targeted Muslims, Christians, and animists without apparent distinction, while ISIS-WA tended to attack military and other government installations.

Anglophone separatists in the Northwest and Southwest Regions kidnapped clerics, including bishops and priests, and sometimes limited Christians' ability to

attend church services. According to the Catholic Church, Anglophone separatists targeted Catholic clergy for kidnapping due to the Church's advocacy for school resumption in the Northwest and Southwest Regions and their perception that the Church was able and willing to pay ransoms. Unidentified individuals killed two Bible translators in Wum; the local Christian population said the largely Muslim Mbororo herder community was responsible. In May residents of the largely Muslim neighborhood of Upkwa in Wum stated that Anglophone separatists burned down their mosque, reportedly because of rumors that some Muslims acted as informants to the security forces. Throughout the year, Muslim and Christian leaders initiated interfaith activities aimed at facilitating interreligious dialogue, promoting peaceful coexistence of different faiths, and seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, where Anglophone separatists were seeking secession. In July the Council of Imams and Muslim Dignitaries organized a seminar in Yaounde to sensitize Muslim preachers to religious extremism.

U.S. embassy officials discussed with government officials the failure to register religious organizations, the impact of the violence in the Anglophone regions on religious freedom, and perceptions by Pentecostal churches of government bias in favor of Catholic and Protestant churches. In discussions with leading figures from the main religious groups, embassy officers stressed the importance of interfaith dialogue, prevention of violent extremism related to religion, and the need for a peaceful solution to the Anglophone separatist crisis. The embassy hosted two roundtables – in Yaounde and Douala, respectively – on religious freedom, during which participants discussed religious freedom as an important component of human rights, the process for registering religious organizations, and key challenges and opportunities facing religious freedom in the country.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 26.3 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2005 census, the most recent available, 69.2 percent of the population is Christian, 20.9 percent is Muslim, 5.6 percent is animist, 1.0 percent belongs to other religions, and 3.2 percent reports no religious affiliation. Of Christians, 55.5 percent are Catholic, 38 percent are Protestant, and 6.5 percent are 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 Christians, the Pew Survey 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.

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 registration, 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 a registered 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 registration 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).

MINAT reviews the file and sends it to the presidency with a recommendation to approve or deny. Registration is granted by presidential decree. Official registration 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. Unregistered religious groups may gather publicly and worship under a policy of “administrative tolerance” as long as public security and peace are not disturbed.

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**

According to multiple media reports, on April 7, government soldiers shot and killed Pastor Elijah Keloh of Berean Baptist Church in Mfumte Village, Northwest Region. The executive director of the Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy told media that soldiers entered Mfumte on the morning of April 7 and shot Keloh when he left his home for church. The executive director said the soldiers killed several other persons, looted homes, and burned down numerous houses during the attack, which took place in an area of frequent conflict between government forces and Anglophone secessionists. According to media reports, most inhabitants of Mfumte Village fled into the forest after the invasion.

According to a Catholic priest, on September 8, soldiers shot and killed parishioner Justina Bih outside Saint Peter Catholic Church in Bambui, Northwest Region. The priest said soldiers on patrol shot Bih when she stepped out of the church during the Sunday service to make a telephone call. Eyewitnesses told media that soldiers shot Bih in the chest despite her having raised her hands when she saw the soldiers. The priest said the shooting was deliberate and an official representative of the central government in Bambui visited the scene but did not take further action.

Residents of Mankon in Bamenda, Northwest Region, stated that on May 15, security forces burned Ramah Christian Center’s Gateway Chapel located in the

Mile 8 neighborhood. They said the soldiers, who also burned several houses, cars, and a clinic, acted in revenge for the killing of two soldiers on the same day by unidentified individuals in the neighborhood. In a May 16 public statement, Minister of Defense Joseph Beti Assomo accused Anglophone separatists of killing the two soldiers and said a violent exchange between unidentified individuals and soldiers searching the neighborhood after the killings resulted in the destruction of property and burning of buildings. Beti Assomo announced an inquiry to identify the perpetrators and said they would face legal action. The government did not announce the outcome of the inquiry by the end of the year.

On October 20, security forces arrested Reverend Paul Njokikang, the local coordinator of Caritas, the Catholic relief and development agency, shortly after he celebrated Mass at Mbinfibe parish in Bamenda, Northwest Region. According to a Catholic priest, soldiers smashed the right side of Njokikang's car, handcuffed him, and took him to the army base at the airport seven miles away, where he was forced to sleep on the bare floor. According to the priest, the army released Njokikang on October 21, after discussions with the Archbishop of Bamenda. The priest said soldiers arrested Njokikang because of his May address to the UN Security Council condemning human rights abuses by security forces and separatists in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. No formal charges were brought against Njokikang.

On February 28, the General Delegation for National Security (Police Administration) summoned Reverend Ghislain Suffo, a CEC pastor in Batoufam, West Region, and questioned him for nine and one-half hours before releasing him without charge. CEC members told media that police accused Suffo of inciting rebellion in a sermon on February 9. The CEC members said the pastor urged Christians to fight for social justice and criticized hypocrisy, self-interest, arbitrary arrests, and poor detention conditions.

On August 25, local residents of Wum Town told media that nomadic Mbororo herders killed local Bible translator Abraham Angus Fung at his home and cut off the arm of his wife, Eveline Fung, who escaped. According to *The Christian Post*, the assailants killed at least six other persons and burned down multiple houses and other properties during the attack. On October 25, unidentified individuals killed a local Bible translator, Benjamin Tem, at his home in Wum. Local residents told media they believed Mbororo herders killed Tem. In both cases, Christian media stated the largely Muslim Mbororo herders acted with the complicity and encouragement of the government, which saw them as allies in its fight against Anglophone separatists. According to International Christian Concern, the

government suspected many local Christians of sympathizing with the separatist cause. *The Christian Post* reported the military in Wum armed minority Muslim herders to fight against the largely Christian local population. The publication accused the government of exploiting sporadic clashes over land between Mbororo herders and local farmers to introduce a religious aspect to the conflict in the Anglophone regions between security forces and separatists.

On July 26, the Bonanjo Court of First Instance appointed a board to manage the CEC's affairs pending resolution of a Church leadership crisis, which began in 2017 when the losing candidate contested the election of Pastor Jean Samuel Toya as CEC president. On July 30, Toya appealed the court's decision to appoint an interim board, which he said contradicted the electoral results and was not in accordance with CEC internal regulations. The government said it acted to preserve order within the CEC.

The government again took no action to adjudicate applications for registration 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. Although by law groups must register, the government continued to allow hundreds of unregistered small religious groups to operate freely under its policy of "administrative tolerance." During a religious freedom conference in Yaounde on August 7, many religious leaders expressed frustration with the government's failure to register religious groups. The leaders highlighted a lack of clarity in the system, such as whether a religious group could operate under the umbrella of another group's registration, and said the government's "administrative tolerance" policy for unregistered religious organizations was ad hoc and inadequate.

Religious leaders in Douala said government administrators often harassed and shut down churches because they were not registered. The leaders also said that unregistered religious organizations had difficulty obtaining loans or buying property. According to MINAT, the ministry was waiting for responses to a survey sent to all religious groups in 2015. Once MINAT received all the responses, the ministry would review the 1990 law on the registration of associations and develop a separate law that would facilitate the registration of religious groups.

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

### **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

Boko Haram and ISIS West Africa continued to commit acts of mass violence within the Far North Region in what observers said was an attempt to impose their religious and political beliefs. Amnesty International stated in a December 11 report that during the year, Boko Haram and ISIS-WA killed at least 275 persons in attacks on the Far North Region. Boko Haram targeted Muslims, Christians, and animists without apparent distinction, while ISIS-WA tended to attack military and other government installations. On June 10, presumed ISIS-WA fighters killed at least 16 soldiers and eight civilians at a military post in Darak Island. On September 13, ISIS-WA killed six soldiers at a military post in Soueram Village. Boko Haram and ISIS-WA perpetrated numerous attacks, sometimes directly targeting places of worship. On November 6, suspected Boko Haram fighters killed retired pastor David Makoni during an attack on the Mayo-Moskota Village. On January 24, terrorists ransacked four churches and burned a Christian hospital during an attack on the predominantly Christian villages of Gossi and Toufou. On July 7, armed fighters broke into the local Catholic chapel in the village of Zeleved and stole church property.

On May 12, suspected Boko Haram fighters attacked the mainly Christian village of Gossi and set fire to the Full Gospel Mission Chapel, damaging a significant portion of its interior and the roof. In the same attack, they destroyed religious objects and musical instruments in the Church of Christ in the Nations. According to the media outlet *Portes Ouvertes*, attackers overcame security forces and set fire to 60 houses, at least 50 of which belonged to Christians.

On September 14, suspected Boko Haram fighters burned the church of the Cameroon Union of Evangelical Churches in Krawa-Mafa Village. Residents said the insurgents burned at least 50 buildings, including the church and the presbytery, and retreated only after the buildings were completely burned down.

In November media reported that Boko Haram militants hacked to death a 12-year-old Christian boy who refused to join them.

Amnesty International reported that on July 3, Boko Haram members kidnapped a woman and girl in a mostly Christian area of Tourou Canton in the north of the country, threatened them with death, and forced them to convert to Islam. The two escaped on July 15.

### **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 May 30, unidentified individuals reportedly attacked Upkwa, a Mbororo settlement in Wum, and set the local mosque on fire. Northwest Region Governor Adolphe Lele Lafrique attributed the attack to Anglophone separatists and said they targeted the largely Muslim Mbororo community, looted property, and set at least 40 houses on fire. According to media, the attack took place after rumors spread that some Muslims had acted as informants on separatists to security forces. Four days later, a video circulated on social media in which armed Mbororo youth promised revenge. A later video showed an unidentified man with burns allegedly inflicted by Mbororo attackers who reportedly also killed two local citizens and burned houses in Wum. The videos reportedly were recorded by government soldiers, who did not intervene to prevent the violence or assist victims. The Southern Cameroon Liberation Council, an Anglophone separatist group, said the Mbororo attacks were a “government-sponsored Fulani Jihad in the Northwest.” On June 15, several media outlets showed a video of predominantly Muslim herders and predominantly Christian farmers in Wum jointly condemning violence in what they said was a peace-making event between the two communities in response to the violence that started on May 30.

Some Catholic clergy said the Anglophone separatists’ perception that the Church was wealthy and could pay significant ransoms fueled the abduction of Church officials, especially in isolated rural areas. They also said separatists often abducted priests in retaliation for the Church’s advocacy for the resumption of classes in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, where there has been a school boycott since the Anglophone crisis started in 2016. Anglophone separatists abducted Catholic Archbishop of Bamenda Cornelius Fontem Esua on June 25, when he attempted to remove barricades separatists had mounted on the road at Belo Village in the Northwest Region. The archbishop was traveling with his

driver and two priests. The archbishop later told media the armed separatists led him to one of their camps and forced him and his companions to spend the night but released them 12 hours later. The archbishop did not clarify if he paid a ransom to secure his release.

On October 3, suspected Anglophone separatists kidnapped Reverend Augustine Nkwain, the Catholic education secretary for the Archdiocese of Bamenda, Northwest Region. In an interview after his release, Nkwain said his captors blindfolded him, forced him into his car, and drove to a separatist camp where they detained him. Nkwain said they accused him of facilitating the resumption of classes in the Northwest Region and made repeated demands for money. The priest said his kidnappers released him 24 hours later after negotiations with Catholic Church authorities. He did not clarify if the Church paid a ransom for his release.

On August 24, unidentified gunmen abducted Catholic bishop of Kumbo George Nkuo at Wainamah as he returned home from a meeting of the bishops of the Bamenda Ecclesiastical Province. Priests and Christians in Kumbo marched toward Wainamah to demand the bishop's release but stopped after Nkuo's captors released him later the same day. The Church did not state whether a ransom had been paid to secure his release. On August 15, unidentified armed men kidnapped two priests in Kumbo, Reverend Franklin Banadzem Dindzee and Reverend Patrick Atang, and released them four days later. The Church did not make a statement on the circumstances of their release.

On July 7, unidentified armed men abducted Paddy Agbor Mbah, the pastor of Jesus Kingdom Embassy Church, as he returned from a pastoral trip in Buea, Southwest Region, to his home in Douala. His family announced his release on July 11; the pastor said the kidnappers did not demand a ransom, and no individual or group claimed responsibility.

On April 16, unidentified individuals attacked two priests at the Catholic church in Akum, Northwest Region. The Cameroon News Agency reported the assailants attacked Reverend Oliver Gam and Reverend Anthony Viban, ransacked their living quarters, and stole items from the presbytery. While no one claimed responsibility, the Cameroon News Agency reported the assault took place shortly after the Catholic Church publicized statistics pertaining to human rights violations by government forces within the Northwest Region.

On July 19, four armed, unidentified individuals broke into the Powerful Gospel Chapel in Douala, Littoral Region, during a prayer session and held the congregation at gunpoint while they assaulted them and stole personal belongings. The parishioners said the individuals pretended to participate in the prayers when they first entered the church before suddenly taking out their weapons and demanding to speak to the pastor. Parishioners stated that while three of the thieves searched their bags at gunpoint, the fourth pointed his gun at the head of the pastor's wife and forced her to lead him to her husband, who was also robbed.

On May 24, members of a mosque in Maroua, Far North Region, brought clubs and machetes to Friday prayers after learning of its suspension by the *lamido*, or local Muslim religious leader. Prayers took place only after security forces prevented a confrontation between members of the mosque and men associated with the *lamido*.

Religious and civil society leaders said the violent conflict in the Northwest and Southwest Regions significantly limited the ability of individuals to worship and engage in other religious practices. Fighting between soldiers and separatists forced members of the Presbyterian church in Mbiame Village, Northwest Region, to abandon their chapel and organize services elsewhere, according to a pastor of the Presbyterian church in Bui, Northwest Region. In May Sheikh Said Wiysanyuy, deputy imam of the Central Mosque in Bui Division, Northwest Region, announced that Ramadan prayers would not be held at six authorized open prayer grounds because of the conflict. On September 1, gunfire between separatists and soldiers forced worshippers at the Three Corners Presbyterian Church in Kumba, Southwest Region, to lie on the floor under pews.

The National Association for Interreligious Dialogue (ACADIR), mainly composed of Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Muslim clergy, established divisional committees in six regions. These committees facilitated monthly interfaith prayer sessions and promoted dialogue between diverse faith-based organizations at local levels. The ACADIR created the National Religious Council, a nongovernmental body to serve as an intermediary between the state and religious groups and facilitate the recognition of faith-based organizations by the government.

On June 22, the Cameroon National Council for Peace, composed of the (Catholic) National Episcopal Conference, Council of Protestant Churches, Islamic Superior Council, and Orthodox Church of Cameroon, organized an interreligious prayer service in Buea, Southwest Region. The group's stated efforts were to promote

peace and social cohesion and end the violent sociopolitical crisis in the Anglophone regions. In a public statement at the end of the service, they condemned hate speech, attacks on educational institutions, and the school boycott in the Anglophone regions, and they urged the government to initiate a plan to resolve the Anglophone crisis.

On July 18, Catholics, Christians, and Muslims participated in a conference at the Cameroon Council of Protestant Churches in Yaounde. The participants committed to promoting justice, forgiveness, and peace within faith-based communities.

The Council of Imams and Muslim Dignitaries organized a seminar on July 25-27 to educate 300 imams and preachers on religious extremism.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The embassy discussed with government officials the failure to register faith-based organizations. The embassy also discussed the perception by Pentecostal churches that the government was biased in favor of the Catholic and Protestant Churches. The embassy underlined the effect of the sociopolitical crisis in the Northwest and Southwest Regions on freedom of worship as well as 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 officials met with leaders from the Christian and Muslim communities, including the coordinator of ACADIR, the national president of the High Islamic Council in Cameroon, the coordinator of the Council of Imams and Dignitaries, and the chancellor of the Greek Orthodox Church in Central Africa. The conversations focused on preventing violent extremism; promoting freedom of religion, interreligious dialogue, and religious diversity; and the search for a peaceful solution to the Anglophone crisis. 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.

During two embassy-hosted roundtables on religious freedom, one in Yaounde on August 7 and the other in Douala on August 21, religious leaders from a variety of faiths, civil society representatives, and a government official discussed key challenges and opportunities facing religious freedom in the country. Participants discussed religious freedom as an important component of human rights, the

government's failure to register religious organizations since 2010, and interfaith initiatives to address the Anglophone crisis.