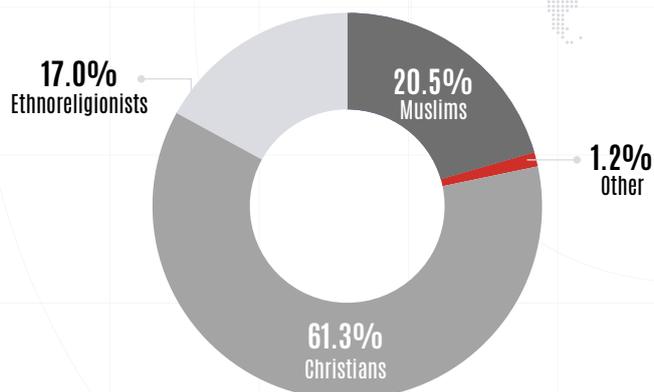




# CAMEROON

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The constitution, promulgated in 1972 and amended most recently in 2008, recognises in its Preamble that “the human person, without distinction as to race, religion, sex or creed possesses sacred and inalienable rights”. No person, the text continues, “shall be harassed on grounds of his origin, religious, philosophical or political opinions or beliefs, subject to respect for public policy.”<sup>1</sup>

The Preamble also asserts Cameroon’s “attachment to the fundamental freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Charter of United Nations and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, and all duly ratified international conventions relating thereto.”

It also affirms that “no person shall be harassed on grounds of his origin, religious, philosophical or political opinions or beliefs, subject to respect for public policy,” that the state “shall be secular” and its “neutrality and independence” will be assured “in respect of all religions,” and that “freedom of religion and worship shall be guaranteed.”

The law requires religious groups to receive government approval to operate, and allows the president to dissolve any existing religious groups. However, hundreds of religious groups operate freely countrywide without official government authorisation. The government has not registered any new religious group since 2010. Registration allows groups to acquire real estate assets through tax-free donations and facilitates the work of foreign missionaries who are allowed to apply for longer-term visas.<sup>2</sup>

Muslims in the Far North Region of the country have always been regarded as holding considerable political and economic power. Christian religious leaders often complain, at least in private, that in practice this has meant that Churches often face lengthy bureaucratic procedures when they want to build their places of worship or other facilities for Church-led social activities.<sup>3</sup>

Religious education is not available in state schools. Private religious schools can offer religious instruction but must meet the same standards as state schools with respect to the curriculum, school facilities, and teacher training.<sup>4</sup>

The following religious festivals are statutory public holidays: Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, the Ascension, the Assumption, Eid-al-Fitr, Eid-al-Adha, and the Prophet’s

Birthday.<sup>5</sup>

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Although relatively stable, Cameroon is divided along several, often overlapping fault lines: linguistic, regional and religious. In addition to 250 indigenous languages, English and French are Cameroon's two main languages.<sup>6</sup> Anglophones, 20 per cent of the population, are concentrated in the more rural and poorer Northwest and Southwest regions, along the border with Nigeria. Since independence, they have felt discriminated by Francophones and the rest of the country. This turned into sectarian violence in 2016.<sup>7</sup>

The two English-speaking regions are also predominantly Protestant. The other eight regions are predominantly French-speaking, with the three northernmost regions mostly Muslim, while the five in central and eastern Cameroon are Catholic.<sup>8</sup>

Linguistic tensions notwithstanding, Cameroon has enjoyed a stable and tolerant religious life until recently. This changed in 2015 with the rise of radical religious groups in the Sahel region espousing Wahhabi and Salafi ideologies, like Boko Haram, which has spilled into Cameroon from neighbouring Nigeria and Chad, threatening the country's historical religious freedom and tolerance.<sup>9</sup>

In general, while religious fault lines are just one piece of the puzzle to understand Cameroon's current political turmoil, they are certainly an important one. Violent attacks have often a religious element, as religious figures are targeted regularly for political reasons. The violence has intensified religious divisions, fomenting mistrust of traditional religious authority.

Within the Muslim community, traditional Sufi Islam, dominated by the Fulani, is being challenged by young Wahhabis, often educated in Sudan and the Gulf countries.<sup>10</sup> Communal divisions have led to localised clashes between groups. Rivalries between Sufi members and Wahhabi groups over leadership of the Muslim community in the south, combined with the growth of radical Islamist armed groups in the north, have become a source for intra-religious conflict in the region and greater violence.<sup>11</sup> Local ethnic and religious leaders, as well as village and traditional chiefs, have become targets of hostile acts since the conflict began. In Christian communities, the monopoly of mainline Catholic and Protes-

tant Churches has been ended by the rise of revivalist Churches. Although they support the government, they have no legal status and are poorly regarded by the established Churches. Revivalist pastors often stay away from interreligious dialogue, preach religious intolerance, and are kept out of official spheres.<sup>12</sup>

Authorities in Cameroon have not paid attention to good interreligious relations and have focused solely on the threat posed by Boko Haram. Moreover, the security forces themselves have engaged in questionable and incendiary conduct, carrying out arbitrary arrests, often perpetrating violence themselves.<sup>13</sup>

In July 2018, security forces shot and killed Ghanaian Pastor Isaac Attoh in West Akone, an area where the army and Anglophone secessionists have clashed over the past year. Attoh's family has accused government forces of trying to cover up the killing by rapidly burying his body without their consent.<sup>14</sup> That same month, another pastor was killed on a road in the Southwest Region during clashes between the military and separatist rebels.<sup>15</sup>

In September 2018, the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon, the Council of Protestant Churches and the Supreme Islamic Council released a joint statement in which they condemned the increasing violence, called for the cessation of hostilities, and invited the parties of the conflict to engage in dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

Cameroon held presidential elections on 7th October 2018. The Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace deployed 231 electoral observers to monitor the vote. However, insecurity in the Northwest and Southwest regions prevented 46 observers from travelling to local polling stations. The Episcopal Conference complained that the security forces denied Catholic observers access to certain polling stations and that some voters could not participate in the elections due to insecurity. They also "noted several irregularities".<sup>17</sup> Two days before the election, several parishes called for prayers for the vote to be held in a peaceful environment.<sup>18</sup>

In October 2018, a young seminarian was killed by soldiers in front of a church in Bamessing. Before killing him, they questioned him while the faithful took refuge in the church.<sup>19</sup> At the end of the month, a missionary from the United States was killed during clashes between the military and rebels in Bamenda.<sup>20</sup>

On 21st November 2018, Bishop Andrew Nkea, the then

Bishop of Mamfe, reported that government soldiers killed Fr. Cosmas Omboto Ondari in front of a church, in Kembong, a township in the Southwest Region. According to eyewitness reports, the soldiers “were shooting at random from their passing vehicle.”<sup>21</sup>

In November 2018, 79 students were kidnapped from the Presbyterian Secondary School in Bamenda and taken to a Presbyterian church before they were released. The school suspended classes afterwards since the security of the students and the staff could not be guaranteed.<sup>22</sup> That same month, three missionaries were held for six days by secessionists in the Anglophone region after they were abducted on their way to Munyenge to deliver humanitarian aid.<sup>23</sup> Also in November 2018, a Kenyan priest was killed by the military in front of his church close to Memfe, in the Southwest region.<sup>24</sup>

In December 2018, the Auxiliary Bishop of Bamenda, Michael Miabesue Bibi, was detained by armed rebels on two occasions as he tried to travel from the Northwest Region to the Southwest Region in order to celebrate Mass.<sup>25</sup> Two months later, in February 2019, 170 students were abducted from a Catholic school in the Northwest Region. They were released a day later and the school was temporarily closed.<sup>26</sup> Boko Haram forces set fire to a Baptist church and the pastor’s house in Tchakamari, a village located in the Far North Region, in April 2019.<sup>27</sup> The following month, Pastor Keloh Elijahu was killed during a raid by the military in Mfumte, resulting in the flight of many local residents.<sup>28</sup>

Amnesty International has reported that between the months of January and November 2019, 275 people were killed due to the resurgence of Boko Haram, despite the claim by Cameroonian President Biya in January that the terrorist group had been “pushed outside”.<sup>29</sup> Besides the killings, Amnesty denounced the group’s atrocities: mutilated civilians, villages looted and set on fire, and women abducted and forced to convert to Islam. The region most affected by the violence, the Far North, has not received the necessary attention of the authorities.<sup>30</sup>

In June 2019, the then Archbishop of Bamenda, Cornelius Fontem Esua, was kidnapped as he returned to the archdiocese after a pastoral tour. He was released the following day.<sup>31</sup> In August 2019, two priests were kidnapped in Kumbo, in the Northwest Region, and held for three days. The kidnapping occurred after the local bishop denounced the violence inflicted upon the local civilian population.<sup>32</sup>

The Catholic Church was invited to attend a national dialogue aimed at solving the secessionist crisis in the Anglophone regions. The event took place between 30th September and 4th October of 2019. The President of the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon said there was “dialogue based on truth” but separatist leaders did not attend.<sup>33</sup>

In October 2019, Boko Haram attacked and looted six Christian towns in the district of Mayo Sava forcing residents to flee.<sup>34</sup> In November 2019, the group killed a retired pastor and a child in a church in Moskota. Two pastors managed to flee the church during the attack but one suffered a gunshot wound. The terrorist group looted the church before leaving.<sup>35</sup>

In November 2019, the Church reported tensions in the northern provinces to Agenzia Fides. It said that many priests had been kidnapped and that the situation had forced the Bishop of Mamfe to close three parishes.<sup>36</sup>

In February 2020, Bishop Abraham Kome, President of the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon, presented the findings of the electoral observers sent by the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace to monitor the 9th February election. He stated that elections had been peaceful but the voter turnout was extremely low, especially in the Northwest and Southwest regions, where insecurity had not allowed citizens to exercise their right to vote and the observers to do their job.<sup>37</sup> Sixteen bishops from around the world wrote a letter to President Biya calling on him to find a solution to the conflict in the country through “a mediated process that includes Anglophone armed-separatist groups and non-violent civil-society leaders.”<sup>38</sup> In April 2020, the new Archbishop of Bamenda, Andrew Nkea Fuanya, wrote a pastoral letter calling for a ceasefire in the two separatist regions.<sup>39</sup> At the beginning of July 2020, peace talks between the government and the separatists were held at the residence of Archbishop Jean Mbarga of Yaoundé. This demonstrates the role that the Catholic Church has had in fostering dialogue and promoting peace and reconciliation in the country.<sup>40</sup>

In August 2020, Boko Haram suicide bombers destroyed a camp for people displaced in the Far North Region killing at least 17 civilians. Some witnesses said that the two suicide bombers were children.<sup>41</sup>

That same month, missionaries told Agenzia Fides that violence was becoming more intense each day in the

Northwest Region. Many people had lost their homes, were fleeing either into the woods or finding refuge in religious communities or parish homes. Furthermore, they worried that children had not been able to attend school because of the tragic circumstances.<sup>42</sup> In September 2020, the President of the Episcopal Conference urged fellow Cameroonians to “seek the common good” amid the chaos generated by the country’s electoral process.<sup>43</sup>

One month later, in October 2020, unidentified gunmen entered the Madre Francisca International Bilingual Academy in Kumba and killed six students in a classroom. The Bishop of Kumba denounced the killings and called on the government to protect civilians.<sup>44</sup>

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the government asked the population to avoid attending places of worship in order to reduce human-to-human contagion. The measure was initially met with objections by some Muslims, who attended prayers in mosques, and staged sit-ins.<sup>45</sup> In August 2020, the government shut down the Tabernacles of Freedoms Ministries Church because it preached that the virus was a “hoax”. Six other churches reportedly preached the same idea.<sup>46</sup> In April 2020, the Archbishop of Bamenda said that, due to the coronavirus lockdown, clashes had diminished greatly in the Northwest and Southwest regions, an area local separatists call Ambazonia.<sup>47</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Cameroon is torn by armed violence on two main fronts: language and religion.

In Anglophone regions, the situation has deteriorated. The disputed presidential elections of October 2018, in which many voters in the Northwest and Southwest regions could not cast their ballot, exacerbated tensions.<sup>48</sup> The violence in these regions has killed over 3,000 people, both civilians and members of the military, and displaced almost 700,000 since 2016.<sup>49</sup> The insecurity has resulted in the violent death of several missionaries and priests. The Catholic Church has played an active role in promoting dialogue and reconciliation between separatists and the government, but both parties have accused the Church of taking sides.<sup>50</sup>

In the predominantly Muslim Far North Region, Boko Haram has carried out violent attacks, targeting both civilians and the military, and terrorising the population.

Since violence broke out in the region, about 5,000 people have died, displacing more than 320,000 people.<sup>51</sup>

Despite, as yet unsuccessful, attempts at mediation in the secessionist issue, and the lack of security in the Far North Region, it is unlikely that the situation will improve in the near future prolonging the human rights and religious freedom abuses.

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