

CAMEROON

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

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

There were no reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. The country is generally characterized by a high degree of religious tolerance.

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. Forty percent of the population is Christian, 20 percent Muslim, and 40 percent practices traditional indigenous religious beliefs. The Christian population is equally divided between Roman Catholics and Protestants.

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

Section II. Status of 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 sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Government is secular in both name and practice and does not favor a particular religion.

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*. 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 or during national events.

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

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 in order for them to function legally. It is illegal for a religious group to operate without official recognition. The law prescribes no specific penalties for violations, however, and there are numerous unregistered small religious groups that operate freely. There were no reports that the Government refused to register any group.

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. Although state institutions continue to dominate post-secondary education, private schools affiliated with religious denominations, including Catholic, Protestant, and Qur'anic schools, have been among the best schools at the primary and secondary levels for many years. 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 practice of witchcraft is a criminal offense under the national penal code, punishable by a 2- to 10-year prison term. Witchcraft is defined under law as "any act of magic or divination liable to harm another in his person, property or substance." People are generally prosecuted for witchcraft only in conjunction with some other offense such as murder; however, there were no reports of convictions of witchcraft under this law. The Government distinguishes between witchcraft and traditional indigenous religious practices. Witchcraft is defined by the law as attempts to do harm by spiritual means.

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 period covered by this report.

The Government does not register traditional 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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were few reports of societal abuses or 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.

Following natural disasters, or to commemorate national events, Christians and Muslims organized ecumenical ceremonies to pray and promote a spirit of tolerance and peace.

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. During their regular trips throughout the country, the Ambassador and other Embassy officials continued to meet with local religious officials to discuss any problems they may have encountered with government officials or with individuals belonging to other religious groups, as well as to discuss attitudes and social conditions for different religious communities.

The Ambassador met regularly with senior Christian and Muslim leaders to demonstrate 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 US" 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 learned to promote interfaith dialogue in an effort to maintain the largely harmonious relationship between religions in this multireligious society.