



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **59.4%**
- Muslims : **20.2%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **19.3%**
- Others : **1.1%**

23,924,000

475,650 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The constitution, promulgated in 1972 and most recently amended 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”.^[1]

The state is defined as secular and its “neutrality and independence” are assured in relation to all religious confessions. Article 18 guarantees the freedom of religion and worship: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

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 country-wide without official government authorisation. The government has not registered any new religious group since 2010. Registration allows groups to acquire property and brings tax benefits; it also facilitates the work of foreign missionaries who are allowed to apply for longer term visas.^[2]

Muslims in the Far North 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 meet lengthy bureaucratic difficulties when they attempt to build their places of worship or other premises for their social activities.^[3]

Unlike state schools, private schools are permitted to offer religious education. However, private religious schools can

only operate if they meet the same standards in terms of education and infrastructure as state schools^[4]

The following religious festivals are considered as official public holidays: Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, the Ascension, the Assumption, Eid-al-Fitr, Eid-al-Adha, and the Prophet's Birthday.

Incidents

On 31st May 2017, Bishop Jean Marie Benoit of Bafia disappeared from his residence. His body was found by a fisherman in the Sanaga River on 2nd June. Although the first reports suggested that he could have committed suicide, in a statement released on 13th June at the end of a general assembly, the Catholic bishops of Cameroon stated that they believed he had been murdered. The bishops demanded that the murderers "be identified and delivered to justice to be judged according to the law" and added that the government must "assume its duty to protect human life, especially that of the ecclesiastical authorities". They also named four other church officials whose murders, dating back to 1988, have never been solved: Joseph Mbassi, who died in 1988, Antony Fontegh, who died in 1990, Yves Plumey, Archbishop Emeritus of Garoua who died in 1991, and Engelbert Mveng, who died in 1995.

The bishops' statement contradicted the version of events given by the public prosecutor of the appeal court in the Central region where the town of Bafia is located, who said that there was an absence of evidence of violence on the bishop's body and that drowning was the most likely cause of his death.^[5] The Journal du Cameroon reported that on 1st June the bishop's Land Cruiser had been found parked on a bridge in Yaounde, 10 miles upstream, and that a handwritten message in French, which read "I am in the water," was found among papers on the passenger seat. The Camernews agency reported that a medical investigator had noted signs of torture on the bishop's body, as well as indications that he was dead before entering the water. At the time of writing, no culprits have been identified and many circumstances surrounding the case remained unclear. No religious services took place inside the cathedral of Bafia after several signs commonly associated with witchcraft, including fresh blood, were found inside the building.^[6]

The English-speaking region of Cameroon, in the west of the country, which has been marred by violent protests since 2016, was the scene of several incidents which religious leaders denounced as attacks on the freedom of religion. On 16th October 2017, the Catholic bishops of the ecclesiastical province of Bamenda denounced the "barbaric and irresponsible use of firearms by the security forces against the unarmed civilian population". The bishops said that they were particularly alarmed by the fact that a number of worshippers, who were on their way to Sunday Mass, were "chased away from their homes, some were arrested, and some others – including defenceless adolescents and elderly persons – were shot dead, particularly using helicopter gunships".^[7]

The Far North region of Cameroon, which has a mixed population of Muslims and Christians, continued to be beset by numerous attacks by the Boko Haram terrorist group, which since 2014 has extended its deadly campaign of mass violence from Nigeria to Cameroon. It is reported Boko Haram's armed attacks scaled down during 2017 and 2018. This can be attributed to the military weakening of Daesh in the Middle East because Boko Haram is the "affiliate" of Daesh in Cameroon. Some attempts by Muslim leaders to call for inter-faith dialogue and religious tolerance were undertaken in May 2017, by the Council of Imams and Religious Dignitaries of Cameroon (CIDIMUC).

In the Boko Haram-affected areas there is a long-standing tradition of inter-religious cooperation between Christians and Muslims, with many remarkable initiatives of peaceful co-existence, particularly the ones led by the Catholic diocese of Maroua-Mokolo, under bishop Mgr Bruno Ateba Edo (since 2014). A number of local media sources reported that, in some cases, Christians secured mosques during prayer sessions while Muslims reciprocated and guarded churches on Sundays, as an early warning method to minimise the risk of surprise attacks.

Several imams in the north of Cameroon continued to argue that Boko Haram's violent campaign is not about religion, but about political extremism and terrorism. Some of them said that the greatest issue was not inter-religious tensions, but an intra-religious conflict inside Islam, which pits Wahabbism against more moderate versions of Islam which have traditionally prevailed in the country. At the same time, it must be noted that Boko Haram's violence has adversely

changed the perception of many ordinary Christians in Cameroon, who associate Boko Haram with Islam; this results in an increased stigmatisation of some Muslims.

The inter-faith organization ACADIR (Association Camerounaise de Dialogue Interreligieuse), founded in 2006 and which operates at national level, has played a commendable role in creating smooth relations between Catholics, Protestants and Muslims. In 2017, the authorities asked ACADIR to take responsibility for developing reintegration programmes for ex-combatants from Boko Haram.

In Maroua in 2015, Christian and Muslim leaders created a Maison de la Rencontre. Set in the Dongo neighbourhood of Maroua, it is run by a committee made up of three Muslims, three Catholics, two Protestants and an Orthodox. The centre promotes Islamo-Christian dialogue and organizes regular workshops for youth, women, local leaders, and others^[8]

Prospects for freedom of religion

During the last few years, the violence caused by Boko Haram in the Far North of Cameroon has continued, although efforts by the military to engage in counter-terrorism operations coupled with the internal weakness of Daesh are factors which explain the scaling down in violent attacks. While there are commendable efforts to smooth inter-faith relations between Christians and Muslims, the nature of the conflict has attracted some degree of hostility and negative perceptions towards Muslims. In addition to this trend, which continued during the reporting period, the attacks to worshippers in the newly emerging conflict in the Western Anglophone regions of Cameroon, as well as the mysterious death of the bishop of Bafia provide serious reasons for concern. Should these focuses of conflict continue without due attention from the relevant authorities during the next few years, there are reasons to believe that the situation of religious freedom could deteriorate.

Endnotes / Sources

[1] Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon, 18th January 1996.

<http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/Cameroon.pdf>, (accessed on 2nd May 2018).

[2] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 'Cameroon', Report on International Religious Freedom for 2016, U.S. Department of State www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper, (accessed on 2nd May 2018).

[3] Conversation, on 10th April 2018, with a priest working in the Far North of Cameroon.

[4] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 'Cameroon', Report on International Religious Freedom for 2016, U.S. Department of State www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper, (accessed on 2nd May 2018).

[5] AFP, News 24 Africa. 'Signs of violence' on body of murdered Cameroon bishop', 12th July 2017.

<https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/signs-of-violence-on-body-of-murdered-cameroon-bishop-20170712> (accessed on 2nd May 2018).

[6] Confidential conversation with a priest working in Cameroon, in March 2018

[7] N.K. Chimtom, Crux Now. 'Catholic bishops, government clash over "genocide" claims in Cameroon', 12th October 2017. <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2017/10/12/catholic-bishops-government-clash-genocide-claims-cameroon/>

[8] "Association Camerounaise pour le Dialogue Interreligieuse". Antenne Régionale de l'Extrême Nord. Synthèse des Activités Menées en 2017-2018. Internal Document provided by one of the organisation's leaders.