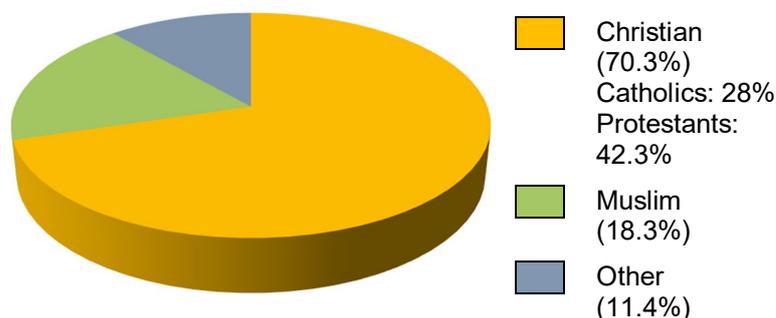


# CAMEROON



<b>Area:</b> 475,442 km <sup>2</sup>	<b>Population:</b> 23,882,500	<b>Political system:</b> Democracy	<b>Major Language(s):</b> French, English
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## Legal framework of 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.” It continues: “No person 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 State is defined as secular and its “neutrality and independence” are assured in regard to all the religious confessions. Likewise, 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.<sup>2</sup>

Official recognition confers no general tax benefits but allows religious groups to receive real estate as a tax-free gift for the conduct of their activities and to gather publicly and worship. It also permits missionaries to receive visas with longer validity.

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

## Incidents

In September 2014 the government allowed 34 predominantly evangelical churches it had closed in 2013 to re-open. Local government officials had accused the Churches of disturbing public order

with raucous services, extorting the spiritually vulnerable, destabilising family structure, and practising unsafe “spiritual medicine” such as exorcisms, which had reportedly led to some deaths.

During the reporting period, most religious freedom-related incidents took place in the north of the country, which since 2013 has suffered because of attacks from the Nigeria-based extremist Islamic group Boko Haram. During 2014, 2015 and 2016 Boko Haram extended its attacks and ideology beyond Nigeria’s borders and changed its tactics of hit-and-run attacks for robust military offensives. These resulted in the control of large swathes of territory in the north-east of Nigeria, as well as attacks in the north of Cameroon, to fit with Boko Haram’s ultimate goal of the establishment of an Islamic polity. Since August 2014, the group has carried out 336 attacks in Cameroon, according to the Cameroonian army. By early 2016, the Cameroonian Army was reported to have deployed 10,000 troops, under the Rapid Response Brigade (BIR), as part of a regional force to combat Boko Haram. The BIR patrols a high-risk 400km stretch of the border with Nigeria. The U.S. military backs them with equipment, training and intelligence gathered from American drones flown out of a base in the town of Garoua.<sup>3</sup>

Many political analysts have noted with concern that attacks from Boko Haram in Cameroon have widened the rift between the north and the south of the country and could potentially create conflicts between Christians and Muslims, as fears of Boko Haram infiltrating some local communities were breeding mistrust. For instance, on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2014 some southern politicians accused northern leaders – most of whom are Muslims – of lack of cooperation over the Boko Haram issue.<sup>4</sup> On 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2014, 104 persons, mostly from *Qur’anic* schools, were arrested in Guirvidig, on suspicion of having links with Boko Haram.<sup>5</sup>

Muslims leaders expressed fears that an anti-terrorism law adopted in mid-2014 could provide a legal framework to allow the government to crack down on civil society organisations critical of the government, as well as on Muslim communities. At the same time, many prominent religious leaders, such as Sheikh Ibrahim Mbombo Moubarak, the Imam of the Douala Central Mosque, have repeatedly spoken out against Boko Haram and its violent extremism. “Boko Haram says it is against Western education, but we say ‘Boko Halal’ to say we support education, because there is no distinction in education,” Cheick Sarbou, the Imam of a Koranic school in Douala, Cameroon’s economic capital, told the Anadolu Agency. “Prophet Muhammad simply said that we [Muslims] should seek knowledge, even if we have to travel to China,” he said.<sup>6</sup>

On 5<sup>th</sup> April 2014, three foreign missionaries, Sister Gilberte Bussier, from Canada, and Italian priests Giampaolo Marta and Gianantonio Allegri, were kidnapped by armed Boko Haram militants at the Catholic Mission of Tcheré, about 20 kilometres from Maroua. On the following day, Bishop Philippe Stevens of Maroua visited the parish of Tcheré, and presided over a celebration of the Eucharist to encourage the Christian community. “I am very much annoyed with the ones who dare invoke the name of God to justify their atrocious acts”, he said. “Using the name of God to do evil, kill and destroy is the greatest blasphemy a man can do against His holy name”, he added.<sup>7</sup> The three religious were released 57 days later.<sup>8</sup>

These attacks have resulted in Catholic clergy working in the far north having to seek government escorts to travel for their normal pastoral duties. The police routinely ask priests to provide them with their timetables of worship in order to secure churches, since Boko Haram has often threatened to carry out bomb attacks during prayers.

Religious leaders in the conflict-affected areas have strived to safeguard good relationships between Christians and Muslims. At the end of April 2014, 25 imams, 13 Catholic priests and 12 Protestant pastors held a workshop on inter-religious dialogue in Maroua in which they vowed to resist religious extremism. At the closing ceremony of this event, Bishop Philippe Stevens remarked that “the only weapon that religious persons have to brandish in front of hatred-mongers is the language of respect and love”. One of the most outstanding initiatives in this sense is the “House of the Encounter”, started by the diocese of Maroua to facilitate meetings between Christians and Muslims.<sup>9</sup>

## Prospects for freedom of religion

Cameroon has a long tradition of respect for religious freedom and mutual respect among the different religious denominations. The attacks by Boko Haram in the far north of the country have put this peaceful coexistence under threat. Although national and international military responses have considerably weakened the capacity of Boko Haram to cause havoc, the high number of refugees and internally displaced persons and the trauma that the conflict has caused among the population are elements that are leaving a legacy of mistrust and division that will take generations to overcome.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/Cameroon.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/weakened-boko-haram-sends-girl-bombers-cameroon-160331175822717.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/regions/afrique/afrique-centrale/cameroun/b101-cameroon-prevention-is-better-than-cure.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> Information from the UN regional office for Central Africa in Libreville (UNOCA)

<sup>6</sup> <http://aa.com.tr/en/world/cameroons-boko-halal/63999>

<sup>7</sup> Information from a missionary working in the diocese of Maroua

<sup>8</sup> The three religious authored a book about their experience in captivity: Gianantonio Allegri – Gillberte Bussière – Giampaolo Marta. *RAPITI CON DIO. Due mesi prigionieri di Boko Haram*. EMI. Bologna. 2015

<sup>9</sup> Information from the diocese of Maroua