

Situation of religious freedom for Christians 2024:

CAMEROON

World Watch List 2024 position: 43

Key Findings: The situation in Cameroon is becoming increasingly perilous for Christians, particularly in the northern regions, where radicalization is escalating among significant Muslim populations. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is fraught with extreme danger. Owning Christian literature, like Bibles, can elicit threats and even violence, forcing many converts to practice their faith clandestinely. Female converts are especially vulnerable, often subjected to coercive marriages to non-Christians. Added to the precariousness is the looming presence of Boko Haram, which disproportionately threatens Christian women with the risk of abduction.

Furthermore, church activities are being heavily disrupted, not only by Boko Haram but also by armed separatist groups and the government itself. In the North West and South West regions, these groups have been targeting communities that are predominantly Christian. As a result, churches have become collateral damage. Churches have been set on fire and church leaders and seminary students kidnapped, as corroborated by reports from the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Cameroon). Armed groups often occupy churches, turning sacred spaces into arenas of conflict.

Moreover, the government is also suppressing anyone who dares speak out against injustice, including Christians. Church leaders who voice opposition to systemic unfairness find themselves silenced, either through intimidation or more overt forms of repression, effectively stymieing any form of dissent within religious circles

Quick Facts: Cameroon

Leader	President Paul Biya
Population	28,608,000
Christians	17,647,000 (Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. , World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023))
Main Religion	Christianity
Government	Presidential Republic

Context: Since 1982, Cameroon has been under the leadership of President Paul Biya, and the nation is sharply divided between Francophone and Anglophone regions. Particularly, the Anglophone areas—northwest and southwest—have been embroiled in a civil war since 2016. The unrest began as a protest by Anglophone professionals against their under-representation in the central government. The government's violent response, involving torture, arbitrary detentions, and killings, escalated the situation, prompting the formation of armed separatist groups. This has led to the displacement of around half a million people and ongoing clashes between government forces and militants.

Amidst this chaos, the government's primary focus on combating separatists has created security loopholes that Boko Haram exploits, particularly in the far north of Cameroon. Christian communities there are vulnerable to extreme violence, with women and girls facing risks of abduction and forced marriage to fighters, along with coerced conversions to Islam. Christian men and boys are also vulnerable, especially those who are church leaders. They are at risk of being abducted, conscripted into militias, subjected to forced labor or tortured and killed.

Christians are politically active but are severely hampered by the prevailing corruption and lack of democracy. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI 2022 Cameroon) ranked the country 142nd out of 180, with a meager score of 26 out of 100.

The long-standing rule of President Paul Biya, who will be 92 by the time of the scheduled 2025 presidential election, shows no signs of abating as he is expected to run for yet another term. This prospective candidacy is particularly noteworthy in the context of the ongoing crises facing the country—especially the Anglophone civil war, rampant corruption, and the deteriorating human rights situation. Biya's age and potential bid for reelection could further inflame these issues and perpetuate the status quo, offering little hope for a more democratic or transparent Cameroon. The government's persistent focus on quelling separatist movements in the Northwest and Southwest regions leaves room for security lapses, which extremist groups like Boko Haram continue to exploit, particularly affecting vulnerable Christian communities.

According to the US State Department's IRFR 2022 report on Cameroon, most Christians in the country primarily reside in the southern and western regions, with the Northwest and Southwest largely Protestant. The report also notes a burgeoning number of Christian revivalist churches in these areas.

In 2022 and 2023, the situation has showed no signs of improvement. Radicalization is still on the rise, and the government has been suppressing and silencing everyone, including Christians, who speak out against injustices. Christians continue to face extreme religious persecution, both from armed groups and the government, complicating the environment for the practice of their faith.

How the situation varies by region: Governance and security in Cameroon are major problems, with the country facing violence in three regions: 1) Far North - where Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to mount attacks; 2) North West and 3) South West, which are both areas where the Anglophone insurgency is based.

Who is affected?

- **Communities of expatriate Christians:** This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.
- **Historical Christian communities:** Roman Catholics (who make up 42% of the Christian population) and some Protestant denominations have their autonomy undermined by the government and have occasionally been affected by Boko Haram violence.
- **Converts to Christianity:** Those who convert to Christianity from Islam experience the most pressure and violence from family and community in Muslim-majority regions. Many converts therefore relocate to safer parts of the country. Those who convert from ethnic religious beliefs to Christianity also face pressure from their community, though less intensely.
- **Non-traditional Christian communities:** Baptists and Pentecostals face opposition in northern Cameroon when they evangelize or attempt to integrate Christian converts from a Muslim background into their churches. Some churches have faced threats of closure for criticizing the government.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

- **Islamic oppression:** In the northern Adamawa region and some eastern regions, Islamic oppression primarily affects Christian converts, who are pressurized to return to Islam by their family and community. Militant groups such as Boko Haram pose a constant threat to life and security and have caused the displacement of many Christians, undermining the history of peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims in modern-day Cameroon.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** President Paul Biya's regime has been responsible for political arrests and killings of Christians, many of whom oppose his rule. This occurs especially in the Anglophone region, due to the independence movement active in the area.

- **Organized corruption and crime:** Cameroon is one of the most corrupt nations in the world. Corrupt officials in the north can be bribed (for example, by imams) against protecting Christians under attack by radical Islamic groups.
- **Clan oppression:** A significant number of the population adheres to traditional belief systems. In areas where Christians oppose such practices, they will face rights violations.
- **Christian denominational protectionism:** Historical denominations do not welcome the activities of new church groups. For example, in 2018, Cameroon's Protestant, Baptist and Catholic churches called on the government to shut down a number of Pentecostal churches.

How are men and women differently affected?

- **Women** Despite being a secular country, the far north region suffers from Boko Haram violence. Women and girls are abducted, forced into marriage, raped and subjected to forced labor, with several girls forced to act as suicide bombers. Female converts from African Traditional Religions or Muslim backgrounds are pressured by families and communities. Often dependent on husbands or fathers, they are put under house arrest or forcibly married to a non-Christian. Married converts face divorce, loss of child custody, and disinheritance.

Female typical pressure points: Abduction; Denied access to social community/networks; Denied custody of children; Denied inheritance or possessions; Discrimination/harassment via education; Enforced religious dress code; Forced divorce; Forced marriage; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – death; Violence – sexual.

- **Men:** Boko Haram poses a major threat to Christian men and boys, particularly church leaders, in the northern regions. Men have been abducted, used for forced labor, tortured and forcibly recruited by militias. Conflict in the Anglophone region has also fueled instability and caused many, including Christians, to flee. Christians also face discrimination in job opportunities, boycotting businesses, and harassment from government officials when they oppose corruption. This affects Christian families economically, financially and psychologically. Male converts to Christianity are pressured by their families and communities, often rejected and denied inheritance.

Male typical pressure points: Abduction; Denied access to social community/networks; Denied inheritance or possessions; Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Forced to flee town/country; Imprisonment by government; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – psychological; Violence – verbal.

Short description of the change in score and why The increase by one point in the score is attributed to escalating pressure, with violence maintaining a high level at 15.9. The overall pressure is on the rise due to the country grappling with the presence of Boko Haram and the ongoing Anglophone crisis. Concurrently, the government imposes restrictions on Christians' religious freedoms

- **Private Life** Christian converts from a Muslim background often hide their new faith. Gathering is very risky, as is owning a Bible or Christian literature.
- **Family Life:** In the case of marital separation, Christian converts from a Muslim background have been denied the right to claim custody of children if their former spouse is Muslim. This particularly affects women in the country's north. Inheritance rights can also be lost after conversion. In several instances, married female converts had to choose between their husband and their faith, leading to forced divorce.
- **Community Life:** Christian converts from Islam are harassed and threatened by their communities in remote areas of the north. They are discriminated against in education and employment and are closely watched by government intelligence agents, which leads to self-censorship

- **National Life:** Freedom of expression is restricted since the government is sensitive to perceived or actual criticism. This can lead to internet shutdowns and arrests. In the north especially, security and armed forces have not been punished when they have arbitrarily arrested, tortured or killed civilians.
- **Church Life:** Clashes between the government's armed forces and separatists have disrupted Christian activities in the Anglophone provinces. It is difficult for new churches to register with the government. Many operate without registration and are rarely punished. However, lack of registration can be used to threaten a church with closure whenever the government feels the church in question has not supported it politically

Situation of Other Religious Minorities: Any religious groups that do not openly support the government face violations. In areas where Christians are the majority, Muslims are ostracized because the community sees them as likely Boko Haram sympathizers.