

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

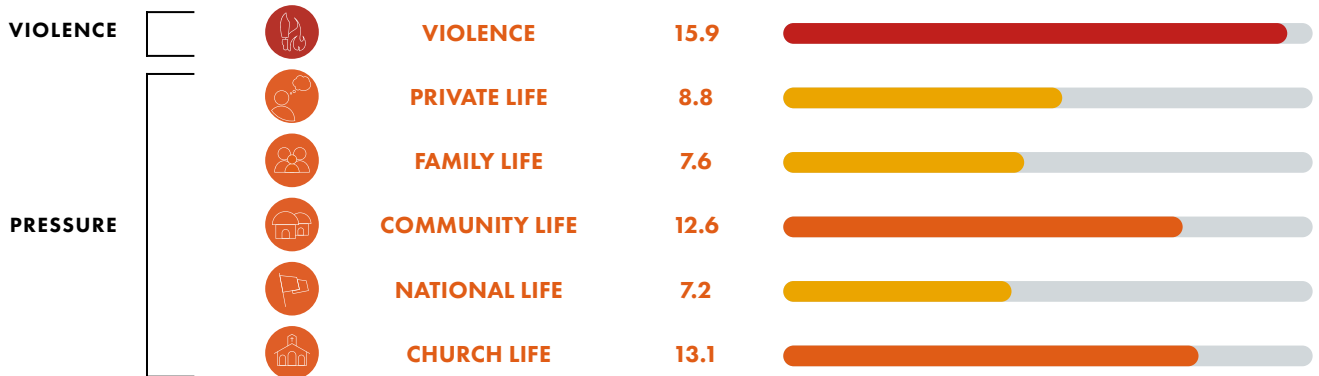
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
45

Cameroon



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Despite the population being over 60% Christian, converts to Christianity from Islam face severe hindrances in Muslim-majority areas, which are becoming increasingly radicalized. In such areas, converts cannot speak about their new faith, even to family members. Female converts to Christianity are often forced to marry non-Christians. Christian women risk abduction by Boko Haram. The Anglophone crisis has also added another dimension to Christians' situation in the country. It has limited the church's functions due to the ongoing crisis of several years and, since the government is engaging with the Anglophone separatists, it has resulted in less security for the northern part of the country where Boko Haram is active. Additionally, the government applies immense pressure on Christians who speak against injustice or lack of freedom of religion in the country.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Paul Biya

POPULATION

27,912,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

17,032,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

| Main Religions | Number of adherents | Percentage |
|--------------------|---------------------|------------|
| Christians | 17,032,000 | 61.0 |
| Muslims | 5,608,000 | 20.1 |
| Ethno-religionists | 4,964,000 | 17.8 |
| Agnostics | 166,000 | 0.6 |

Source²

Cameroon has been ruled by President Paul Biya since 1982. Journalists and opposition risk harassment and imprisonment, and corruption is endemic. The country contains both Francophone and Anglophone regions. The Anglophone regions (north-west and south-west) have been engulfed in civil war since 2016 when Anglophone lawyers and teachers protested against under-representation in the central government. The government responded with violence including torture, arbitrary detention and [killings](#), which led to the formation of non-state armed groups, fuelled separatist sentiment and [displaced](#) half a million from

their homes. Fighting continues between government security forces and separatist militants, and Boko Haram operates in the far north.

Christians are attacked from both sides if they do not support their cause. Also, since the government is focused on combatting separatists, Boko Haram takes advantage of security loopholes to target Christians. Christian women and girls risk being abducted, forcibly married to fighters and forced to convert to Islam. Christian men and boys, particularly church leaders, are also vulnerable to abduction. They may be forced into the ranks of militias, used for forced labor, or tortured, and killed.

How the situation varies by region

Christians suffer violations especially in violent areas – 1) Far North, where Boko Haram continues to mount attacks; 2) North West and 3) South West, both areas where the Anglophone insurgency is growing. The Islamic community is concentrated in the north; Christian communities in the southern and western regions. It is also important to note that the government puts pressure on some Christian denominations who do not openly support its policies. This is particularly the case in major cities.

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

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 over 44% of the Christians 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. While families pressurize Christians into re-converting to Islam, they are also threatened by Boko Haram, who would like to kill them. 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 intense.

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. Others have tried to align themselves with the government, by campaigning and mobilizing funds for the ruling party during elections.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

In the northern Adamawa region and some eastern regions, Islamic oppression primarily affects Christian converts. Christian converts experience violations from family and community, and they are pressurized to return to Islam. 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 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. They are put under extreme pressure to renounce their faith, 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.

- 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
- Trafficking
- 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 via job opportunities, boycotted 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.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Forced to flee town / country
- Incarceration by government
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

| WWL Year | Position on Open Doors World Watch List | Persecution rounded score out of 100 |
|----------|---|--------------------------------------|
| 2023 | 45 | 65 |
| 2022 | 44 | 65 |
| 2021 | 42 | 64 |
| 2020 | 48 | 60 |
| 2019 | 56 | 54 |

The increase in the score by 1 point in WWL 2022 is mainly because of the increase in pressure in the Church sphere. Due to the conflict in the Anglophone region and the existence of Boko Haram in the northern part of the country and the overall Dictatorial paranoia, church life is very limited for Christians. Christians face intimidation and attacks if they speak against the atrocities going on in the country (perpetrated both by government and separatist forces). At times, church premises have been used as military bases. The existence of rampant corruption in the country has also made security and the rule of law virtually non-existent in many areas.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **June 2022:** Boko Haram fighters killed six civilians when they attacked Tourou village in the Mayo Tsanaga division ([Journal du Cameroun, 3 June 2022](#)).
- **June 2022:** ISWAP or Boko Haram fighters attacked Gharama and Ngormi villages (Kousseri, Logone-et-Chari, Extreme-Nord) and killed six civilians.
- **June 2022:** It is suspected that Boko Haram killed a civilian in Bargaram (Hile-Alifa, Logone-et-Chari, Extreme-Nord). They also burnt a church and looted several valuable objects.
- **July 2022:** Boko Haram (JAS) attacked Koza (Koza, Mayo-Tsanaga, Extreme-Nord), killing four people. Properties, including a church and shops, were looted and destroyed.

| WWL Year | Christians abducted | Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted | Christians forced to flee their countries | Christians physically or mentally abused |
|----------|---------------------|--|---|--|
| 2023 | 25 | 100* | 100* | 100* |
| 2022 | 4 | 100* | 100* | 100* |

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

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.

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.

Family life

In the case of marital separation, Christian converts from a Muslim background have been excluded from 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.

Church life

Clashes between the government 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.

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



International obligations & rights violated

Cameroon has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
4. Convention against Torture, and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Cameroon is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christians are killed for their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christian converts face coercion, violence, and harassment, including the loss of a job or opportunities for further education unless they renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18, ICESCR Art. 2)
- Peaceful Christian religious gatherings are restricted by Boko Haram, security restrictions, and denial of registrations or meeting permits (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)
- Christians face discrimination in the public and private work force (ICCPR Art. 18, ICESCR Art. 2)
- For a fear of reprisals due to a lack of security, Christians are denied their right to freedom of expression (ICCPR Art. 19)
- Christian women are forcibly married and forced to recant their beliefs (ICCPR Art. 23 and CEDAW Art. 16)



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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.



Nearly 400 vulnerable families received food and other relief aid from Open Doors after their livelihoods were affected by economic restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Open Doors in Cameroon

Open Doors has served the church in Cameroon for many years with persecution awareness seminars. Since 2008, with the help of local churches and partners, our focus has been on finding and equipping the persecuted church. Our vision is for a holistically strong church that knows how to biblically respond to persecution and care for new believers and the traumatized in the community. We aim to achieve this through:

- Persecution crisis relief and trauma care
- Economic empowerment and care (spiritual and physical) for new believers

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
