

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

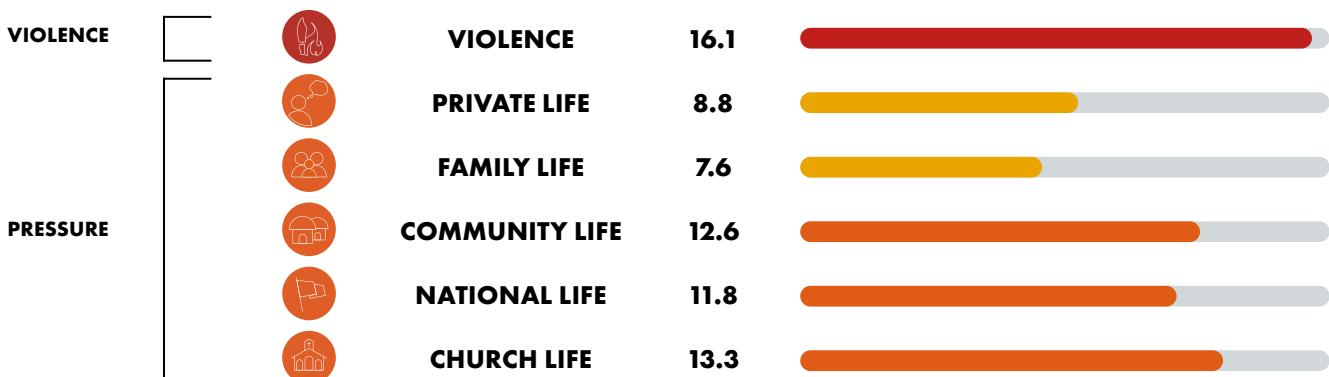
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
37

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 ($6 \times 16.7 = 100$).

Key findings

Christian persecution in Cameroon is intensifying, particularly in the northern regions where radicalization is spreading among Muslim populations. Violence by Boko Haram and similar groups targets Christians through abductions, church burnings, and exclusion from community life. Clan-based control, organized crime, and corruption further deepen their vulnerability, especially where state authority is absent or complicit. Christians who speak out against state abuses face surveillance, intimidation, or arrest under broad anti-terror laws. Hundreds of churches who criticize the regime have been closed. Government inaction and failures due to a lack of capacity in the face of jihadist and clan-based persecution is rarely challenged without reprisal. This has fostered a climate of fear and silenced Christian leadership, weakening community resilience and access to justice. In the lead-up to the election in which President Biya claimed victory for an eighth term (October 2025), Christians came under significant pressure to declare their loyalties and take sides.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Paul Biya

POPULATION

30,151,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

17,443,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	17,443,000	57.9
Muslims	6,573,000	21.8
Ethnic religionists	5,801,000	19.2
Others	334,000	1.1
	Total	100%

Source²

Cameroon has been under the rule of President Paul Biya since 1982. The country remains sharply divided between Francophone and Anglophone regions, with the North-West and South-West embroiled in a civil conflict since 2016. What began as peaceful protests by Anglophone professionals against marginalization escalated into armed rebellion following a violent government crackdown involving torture, arbitrary arrests and killings. This conflict has displaced over half a million people and continues to fuel violence between separatist militias and state forces.

As the government concentrates its efforts on suppressing Anglophone separatists, security vacuums have emerged, particularly in the Far North, where Boko Haram has exploited the chaos. Christian communities in this region face severe threats, including abductions, forced conversions, and attacks on churches. Christian women and girls are especially at risk of being kidnapped, raped, or forced into marriage with fighters. Christian men, especially pastors, face the threat of execution, forced labor, or conscription into armed groups.

The situation is compounded by systemic corruption and weak democratic institutions. Cameroon ranks 140 out of 180 on Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index. President Biya, now over 90, is expected to seek reelection in 2025, further deepening political stagnation amid widespread human rights abuses. His extended rule has entrenched impunity, weakened institutions, and failed to address the mounting crisis.

Freedom of religion remains tightly restricted. According to Freedom House (2025), Christians in conflict-affected regions are unable to practice their faith openly. Boko Haram continues attacks in the Far North, while in the Anglophone regions, churches are burned, pastors kidnapped, and believers caught between military operations and insurgents. In 2023, the government blocked the registration of a new branch of the Evangelical Church, highlighting administrative interference in religious life.

Christian persecution in Cameroon is not only driven by jihadists but is embedded in broader state repression, ethnic favoritism, and systemic dysfunction. The government silences dissent—including within the church—and offers little protection. As radicalization spreads and governance remains authoritarian, the space for Christians to live, worship, and speak freely continues to shrink. In 2024 and 2025, the church faced unrelenting pressure from all sides, with no signs of improvement, pressure from the government on the church in the context of election campaigns was intense.

¹ Gina A. Zurlo, ed., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

² Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

How the situation varies by region

Cameroon's governance and security landscape is fractured, with Christians in three major regions experiencing sustained violence. In the Far North, Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) target Christians through village raids, church attacks, school burnings, and abductions, forcing many to flee or live in fear. In the North-West and South-West—epicenters of the Anglophone crisis—Christians are trapped between separatist militias and government forces. In all three regions, the breakdown of state authority and rising extremism mean Christians face physical threats and daily pressures that erode religious freedom.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Roman Catholics (42% of the Christian population) and some Protestant denominations have had 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 relocate to safer parts of the country. Converts from ethnic religious beliefs to Christianity also face pressure from their community.

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

Islamic oppression is most visible in the Far North, Adamawa, and parts of the East, where Christians, especially converts from Islam, face severe pressure to renounce their faith. This pressure comes from families, communities, and militant groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP, who exploit weak state presence to enforce radical ideologies. Christians are targeted through abductions, forced conversions, and deadly attacks, resulting in mass displacement and the collapse of Christian-Muslim coexistence. In these regions, oppression has moved beyond social pressure to an existential threat, leaving Christians unable to practice their faith openly.

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Under President Paul Biya's authoritarian regime, Christian leaders and activists, especially in Anglophone regions, who advocate for reform or criticize state abuses face arbitrary arrests, harassment, or worse. The regime often equates dissent with separatism, intensifying the crackdown on Christians in conflict zones.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Cameroon's systemic corruption (ranked 140/180 on Transparency International's 2024 CPI) erodes protection for Christians. In the north, corrupt officials—often influenced by religious or financial interests—ignore attacks or deny aid to Christian victims. Justice is rare, and impunity prevails.

CLAN OPPRESSION

In areas dominated by traditional religions, Christians who reject ancestral practices often face communal punishment, exclusion, or rights violations.

CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONAL PROTECTIONISM

Established denominations (Catholic, Protestant, Baptist) frequently pressure authorities to restrict Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Evangelical groups. These newer churches are often denied registration, blocked from using public spaces, or labeled as illegitimate by older church structures, creating internal persecution within the Christian community.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

In Cameroon's Far North, Boko Haram and ISWAP abduct Christian women and girls, forcing them into marriage, sexual slavery, or even using them as suicide bombers. The conflict in Anglophone regions has intensified risks, with government forces and separatists committing gender-based violence. Female converts from Muslim or Animist backgrounds face house arrest, forced marriage, or expulsion from their families. Married converts risk divorce, child custody loss, and disinheritance. Poverty and displacement increase their vulnerability, leaving many trapped in cycles of exploitation and abuse.

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
- Forced out of home/expulsion
- Forced to flee town/country
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

Christian men and boys in Cameroon face severe persecution, particularly in the Far North and Anglophone regions. Boko Haram and separatist militants abduct, torture, and forcibly recruit them, with church leaders, students, and teachers targeted. Schools remain unsafe, as mission schools are attacked and clergy kidnapped. Men who resist corruption or speaking against injustice face arrest, torture, or economic boycotts. Converts from Islam risk rejection, loss of inheritance, and forced marriages. Many flee to escape violence, leaving families impoverished and communities weakened.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Targeted seduction
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	37	70
2025	43	67
2024	43	66
2023	45	65
2022	44	65

Cameroon's score increased by 3 points, driven mainly by the rise in pressure in the national sphere, which climbed from 8.4 to 11.84. This sharp change reflects the pressure exerted by national and local authorities, particularly during the election campaign, when churches were pushed to align with, or avoid contradicting, the ruling party's ideology and political agenda. The actors already present, especially the non-state groups, maintained the same level of pressure as in previous years.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- February/March 2025:** In the Anglophone North-West, local reports confirm a church building in Bamenda was destroyed by fire in 2025—its cause remains contested, but the congregation has been displaced from its sanctuary.
- May 2025:** Fr. Valentin Mbai'barem, parish priest of St. John the Baptist, Madingring (Archdiocese of Garoua), was kidnapped with five others on the Guidjiba–Tcholliré road. Kidnappers demanded ransom; one civilian hostage (a teacher) was killed. Fr. Valentin was later released.
- June 2025:** In the Far North, suspected Boko Haram and ISWAP raids struck mixed civilian communities. Nine fishermen were killed and at least four abducted around Darak on Lake Chad, according to local reporters and church leaders. Christian families are among those repeatedly targeted.



WWL Year	Christians abducted	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians internally displaced
2026	100*	100*	10*	10,000*
2025	10*	100*	100*	1,000*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period – for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. 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. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.*

PRIVATE LIFE

Christian converts from Islam in Cameroon often have to live in secrecy. They hide their faith, avoid displaying Bibles or Christian symbols, and refrain from open prayer. Discovery can lead to rejection, harassment, or violence from family or community. In northern regions, converts are closely monitored and may face threats of being forced back to Islam or being socially isolated. The fear of exposure forces many to practice their faith privately, limiting spiritual support and fellowship.

FAMILY LIFE

Converts from Islam, especially women in the north, face serious family-based persecution. They risk divorce, house arrest, or forced marriage. In custody disputes, Muslim relatives often prevail, with Christian mothers losing access to their children. Inheritance is commonly denied. Many women are forced to choose between their faith and family life, facing pressure to abandon Christianity or accept second-class status in their homes and communities.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Christian converts face persistent discrimination in schools, markets, and workplaces. Harassment and threats from local communities are frequent, especially in remote areas. Government surveillance of suspected converts adds to the fear. Many avoid joining churches or attending

services to escape attention, effectively isolating them from community support. Converts face both religious hostility and limited economic opportunities, reinforcing their marginalization.

NATIONAL LIFE

Cameroon tightly controls religious and political expression. Christians who challenge government policies face surveillance, detention, or intimidation. Revivalist or evangelical groups are particularly vulnerable to legal restrictions, with church meetings disrupted or banned under claims of disturbing public order. Military courts, media censorship, and internet blackouts are used to silence dissent. In the Far North, Christians suffer from both jihadist attacks and unaccountable security forces, compounding fear and insecurity.

CHURCH LIFE

Churches in conflict zones like the North-West, South-West, and Far North face immense challenges. Boko Haram and ISWAP have attacked worship centers and kidnapped clergy. Government forces monitor sermons and block registration for new churches, especially Pentecostal or revivalist groups. Unregistered congregations face closure. Pastors who speak about political issues are harassed. This combination of militant violence and state repression undermines the church's ability to operate safely and openly.



International obligations & rights violated

Cameroon has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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 against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment ([CAT](#))
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#))
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 workforce (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)

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 commonly ostracized because the community sees them as likely Boko Haram sympathizers.



Open Doors in Cameroon

Open Doors has served the Church in Cameroon for many years through persecution awareness seminars. From 2008 our focus has shifted to finding and equipping the persecuted Church. Working with like-minded partners and local churches, our vision is for the persecuted church in Cameroon to be spiritually, emotionally and socio-politically resilient to the various threats it faces. In partnership with churches, we aim to achieve this through:

- Biblical discipleship, unity, evangelism and justice
- Holistic (integrated) ministry, resourcefulness and persecution preparedness



ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.