

CHURCH AND STATE RELATIONS IN CAMEROON: A COMPLEX HISTORY OF TENSION, REGULATORY CONTROL AND ACCOMODATION

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Modern Cameroon is a highly complex heterogeneous nation with a wide diversity of ethnic groups, languages, culture and religions. Like most other African countries, the great hopes of political, social, economic, and cultural development that came with independence, have been compromised by years of repressive, corrupt, and incompetent authoritarian rule. The 1990 winds of change have by and large left the country still trapped in its authoritarian past but sustained by a charade of multiparty democracy. In the midst of the continuous authoritarianism and the inevitable poverty and underdevelopment that have come with it, the church has, since the colonial days, tried to play a role not only in the spiritual wellbeing of the people but also in their political, economic and social development. This has often brought it into conflict with the state.

Most studies on church-state relations in Cameroon have often either focused on one or some of the dominant denominations. In doing so, they often miss some of the intricate inter and intra-denominational dynamics influenced by factors such as ethnicity, geographical location and political opportunism that are often at play. This paper will amongst other things, look at the historical background of this relationship and provide an overview of the position of the different religious denominations that operate in the country today. It will also examine the role the churches have played in the democratic process and the way in which it has led to a tense situation in which the state has by way of regulation and accommodation tried to control the uneasy relationship with the church. In the conclusion, it will be shown that in spite of resistance and even occasionally, open confrontation, religious denominations in Cameroon have the potential to play an even greater role in promoting change and the common good.