

# **GABON 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion and worship and equality for all, irrespective of religious belief. It grants religious groups autonomy and the right to provide religious instruction. The government denied more than 100 applications for registration of religious groups, higher than the previous year. The government stated that the reasons were often related to documentation, as well as an increase in individuals seeking to use religious cover to scam individuals. Ministry officials described the religious groups it rejected as often “one-man operations,” practicing a mixture of Christianity and traditional animist beliefs.

Leaders of Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic faiths met regularly, attended each other’s major festivals, and worked together to promote religious tolerance and to defend freedom of religion.

U.S. embassy staff met with senior government officials from the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to encourage continued respect for religious freedom and encouraged government officials to continue their outreach to religious communities to discuss religious freedom. Embassy staff encouraged Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic leaders to continue their interfaith dialogue and activities promoting interreligious tolerance and understanding.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (July 2018 estimate). Demographic studies do not track religious affiliation, and estimates from religious leaders and government agencies vary widely. The Episcopal Conference of Gabon estimates approximately 80 percent of the population is Christian. Of the Christian population, approximately two-thirds are Roman Catholic and one-third Protestant. The High Council of Islamic Affairs estimates approximately 10 percent is Muslim, including many noncitizen residents with origins in West Africa. The remaining 10 percent of the population practices animism exclusively or does not identify with any religious group. Many individuals practice a syncretic faith that combines elements of Christianity with traditional indigenous faiths, Voodoo, or animism. There is a very small number of Jews.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution defines the state as secular and establishes separation of religion and state. It prohibits religious discrimination and holds all citizens equal before the law, regardless of religion. The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, the free practice of religion, and the right to form religious communities that may govern and manage their affairs independently, “consistent with public order.” The constitution stipulates religious communities whose activities are contrary to law or promote conflict among ethnic groups may be banned.

The law requires all associations to register, including religious groups. Registered groups are eligible for exemptions from fees for land use and construction permits. To register, a group must present to the MOI copies of its founding statutes and internal rules, a letter attesting to publication of these documents in the applicable local administrative bulletin, a formal letter of request for registration addressed to the minister of interior, a property lease, the police records of the group’s leaders, and the group’s bank statements. The registration fee is 10,000 CFA francs (\$17). Registered religious groups must also provide the MOI with proof of nonprofit status to receive exemptions from local taxes and customs duties on imports. The MOI maintains an official registry of religious groups.

The constitution states parents have the right to choose their children’s religious education. The state provides for public education based on “religious neutrality.” Public schools are secular and do not provide religious instruction. Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant groups operate primary and secondary schools, in which representatives of religious groups give religious instruction. These schools must register with the Ministry of Education, which ensures they meet the same standards as public schools.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

The MOI reported it generally processed registration requests from religious groups within one month and estimated it rejected more than 100 such applications during the year, compared with more than 40 in the 2016-17 period. Ministry officials described the religious groups it rejected as often “one-man operations,”

practicing a mixture of Christianity and traditional animist beliefs. Their difficulty with registration usually concerned gathering the appropriate documents, according to ministry officials. In addition, there was anecdotal evidence of an increase in “fake pastors” seeking to defraud their followers. The MOI emphasized the necessity for all groups to register and no longer allowed unregistered groups to operate freely. Unregistered groups charged with fraud or other illegal activity were most likely to be sanctioned.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic leaders met regularly, attended each other’s major festivals, and worked together to promote religious tolerance. The interfaith dialogues and activities included discussion of religious issues.

In November Archbishop of Libreville Basile Mve Engone and Ali Akbar Onanga Y’Obegue, Special Adviser of the head of the Muslim community in the country, called upon their respective religious communities to form a prayer chain for a swift recovery of President Ali Bongo Ondimba, who had fallen ill.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

U.S. embassy staff met with senior MOI officials to encourage continued respect for religious freedom, to discuss registration issues, and to encourage government officials to continue their outreach to religious communities to discuss religious freedom.

Embassy staff encouraged Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic leaders to continue their interfaith dialogue and activities promoting interreligious tolerance and understanding, such as regular meetings among religious leaders of different faiths.