

GABON 2019 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 continued to report a trend of local actors using religious cover to defraud individuals. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) rejected some applications to register religious groups for lack of documentation. 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 defend freedom of religion.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.2 million (midyear 2019 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 is Roman Catholic and one-third Protestant, which includes evangelical and awakening churches. 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 and a growing Baha’i community that was established in the 1960s.

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 laws of the country 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 provide religious instruction. These schools must register with the Ministry of Education, which ensures they meet the same standards as public schools. The government does not fund private schools, religious or secular.

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. 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. Unregistered groups charged with fraud or other illegal activity were most likely to be sanctioned. Ministry of Interior officials indicated an effort

was underway to update the regulations governing associations and religious groups, which are currently treated the same.

On June 8, government authorities organized an interfaith religious service to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the death of former president Omar Bongo Ondimba. Four religious faiths were represented at the service and led the ceremony: an imam, the Catholic archbishop, the president of the Evangelical Church, and a representative of New Awakening Church. On August 16, government authorities organized an interfaith service to commemorate the 59th anniversary of independence.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In August an interfaith group of religious leaders representing the Catholic Church, Evangelical Church of Gabon, the High Council for Islamic Affairs, and a group of revival churches issued a call for “forgiveness and reconciliation,” calling on government and elites to address the high level of societal tension. 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 January members of the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church of Gabon celebrated the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” with pulpit exchanges and common prayers.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy staff met with senior MOI officials throughout the year to encourage continued respect for religious freedom, discuss registration issues, and encourage government officials to continue their outreach to religious communities in support of religious freedom.