

GABON 2016 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 some applications for registration during the year, often for reasons related to documentation. Ministry officials described the religious groups it rejected as often “one-man operations” practicing a mixture of Christianity and traditional animist beliefs. Whether registered or not, officials stated these groups were allowed to operate freely if they obeyed the law and did not harm their neighbors.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy staff met with senior government officials from the Ministry of Interior to encourage continued respect for religious freedom and asked 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 1.7 million (July 2016 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. 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 Jewish community.

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 that religious communities whose activities are contrary to law or promote conflict among ethnic groups may be banned.

The law does not require religious groups to register, but those that do are eligible for exemptions from fees for land use and construction permits. To register, a group must present to the Ministry of Interior (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. 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” but permits religious instruction in public schools if the parents request it. Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant groups operate primary and secondary schools. 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. The government denied some applications for registration during the year; the MOI estimated that it rejected over 30 such applications in the past two years. 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. Whether

registered or not, ministry officials stated these groups were allowed to operate freely if they obeyed the law and did not harm their neighbors.

Muslim leaders reported the MOI did not request they discourage Muslim women from wearing the full-face veil in public as they had requested in previous years. Muslim leaders and the MOI reportedly remained cooperative and in agreement on this issue.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Interfaith dialogues among senior Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic leaders concluded there were no significant societal pressures or actions against religious freedom. Leaders of all three faiths met regularly, attended each other's major festivals and worked together to promote religious tolerance and to defend freedom of religion. The interfaith dialogues and activities included discussion on religious issues. Prior to the August presidential elections, leaders of all three major faiths made a joint appeal for domestic peace and interfaith dialogue.

A newly arrived rabbi stated he hoped to reach out to the Jewish community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy staff met with senior government officials from the MOI to encourage continued respect for religious freedom, to discuss registration issues, and to ask 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.