

GABON 2017 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 again denied some applications for registration of religious groups 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. President Ali Bongo Ondimba and other government officials strongly denounced a knife attack against two foreigners in Libreville, purportedly in retaliation for what the attacker called U.S. actions against Muslims.

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. In October political activists prevented Muslims from entering a mosque for prayers. Other faith leaders immediately denounced the actions, and activities at the mosque resumed peacefully the following day.

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 1.7 million (July 2017 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 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 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 (\$18). 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 40 such applications in 2016 and 2017. 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. The MOI emphasized the necessity for all groups to register and no longer allowed unregistered groups to operate freely.

On December 16, a Niger citizen stabbed two Danish journalists and allegedly shouted “Allahu akbar.” The man, a long-time resident, reportedly told police he acted in retaliation for what he called U.S. attacks against Muslims, as well as U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. The defense minister denounced the isolated act and assured that the perpetrator and any accomplices would be punished to the full extent of the law. The president also responded this incident would not mar the harmonious relations that the country has with its foreign residents who respect the country’s laws and institutions.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Leaders of all three faiths 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 October political activists prevented Muslims from entering a mosque near an opposition leader’s home for prayers and also posted threatening messages on social media. To avoid escalation, the imam cancelled activities on that day. Other faith leaders immediately and publicly denounced the actions. Activities at the mosque resumed the following day.

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.