

GABON 2015 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 but did not indicate how many. Muslim leaders reported the government privately continued to request they discourage Muslim women from wearing the full-face veil in public due to the government's security concerns concerning militant Islamic groups.

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 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 2015 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 mystical faiths, Voodoo, or animism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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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.” It 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 to the MOI 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. It 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.

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 but did not indicate how many.

Although there was no law banning religious face coverings, Muslim leaders reported the minister of interior continued to privately request they discourage Muslim women from wearing the full-face veil in public due to what the minister said were concerns over the security forces’ inability to identify women who covered their faces and concerns regarding militant or terrorist Islamic groups which operated in nearby countries. Muslim leaders continued to cooperate with

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the minister's request by speaking to Muslim communities throughout the country, stating the Quran did not require women to wear the full-face veil.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Interfaith dialogues between imams and the Catholic archbishop concluded there were no societal pressures or actions against religious freedom. The interfaith dialogues and activities included discussion and debates on religious issues and sporting events. Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim youth also conducted a high school tour to talk about peace throughout the year.

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 and asked government officials to continue their outreach to religious communities to discuss religious freedom.

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