

GABON 2021 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 local actors attempting to use religious cover to defraud individuals. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) rejected some applications to register religious groups for lack of documentation and “authenticity.” Because of the continued COVID-19 pandemic, government health safety protocols remained in place, requiring churches to obtain government permission to reopen and limiting the number and size of services. Religious leaders said they were concerned that the size limitations (no more than 30 worshippers per service) continued to be excessive, as some churches and mosques were built for congregations of 1,000 or more. Although the restrictions were not widely observed, religious leaders said they wanted the government to lift them officially.

Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim leaders met in February to discuss the government’s COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

U.S. embassy staff met with senior ministry officials, nongovernmental organizations, and local religious leaders to encourage continued respect for religious freedom and to discuss the government’s response to the pandemic as it related to religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.3 million (midyear 2021). 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 churches. The High Council of Islamic Affairs estimates approximately 12 percent of the population is Muslim, including many noncitizen residents with origins in West Africa. There are no published estimates of the Sunni/Shia percentages, although the Sunni are predominant. The remaining 8 percent of the population practices animism or does not identify with any religious group. Many individuals practice a syncretic faith such as Bwiti that combines elements of Christianity with traditional indigenous faiths, Voodoo, or

animism. Other traditional faiths in the country are Mwiri and Ndiobi. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include 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, including religious groups, to register with the MOI. Registered groups are eligible for exemptions from fees for land use and fees for 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 MOI, 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. Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim 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, although in some schools it may subsidize a portion of the teachers' salaries.

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

Government Practices

According to the MOI, the difficulty of new religious groups registering with the ministry usually involved gathering the appropriate documents. Ministry officials described the religious groups it did not register as often being “one-man operations” practicing a mixture of Christianity and traditional animist beliefs, and “lacking authenticity.” Unregistered groups charged with fraud or other illegal activity were those most likely to be sanctioned. MOI officials said they continued to update the regulations governing associations and religious groups, which were treated identically in those regulations.

Because of the continued COVID-19 pandemic, government health safety requirements remained in place. These included that no place of worship could reopen without permission, attendance at services was limited to 30 persons, only one service could be held a day, and services could not offer communion. Religious leaders said they were concerned that the size limitations continued to be excessive, as some churches and mosques were built for congregations of 1,000 or more persons. Although the restrictions were not widely observed, religious leaders said they wanted the government to officially lift them.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In February, Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim leaders met to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic and official social distancing restrictions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy staff met with senior MOI officials, nongovernmental organizations, and local religious leaders during the year to encourage continued respect for religious freedom and discuss the government’s response to the pandemic as it related to religious freedom.