

GABON 2020 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 rejected some applications to register religious groups for lack of documentation and “authenticity.” Tensions developed between the government and religious groups when religious leaders objected to government measures to mitigate the COVID pandemic that affected reopening of churches. While minor clashes occurred and two priests were arrested, there were no widespread protests.

Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim leaders met irregularly because of the COVID pandemic and government restrictions imposed since March on the number of people allowed to assemble. They worked together to promote religious tolerance, defend freedom of religion, and advocate for the freedom to assemble while encouraging compliance with COVID-related mitigation measures.

U.S. embassy staff met with senior ministry officials, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), 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 2.2 million (midyear 2020 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 12 percent is Muslim, including many noncitizen residents with origins in West Africa. The remaining 8 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. 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 Ministry of Interior (MOI). 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 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 (\$19). 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, 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

The MOI reported it generally processed registration requests from religious groups within one month. Any difficulty with registration usually involved gathering the appropriate documents, according to ministry officials. 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 indicated their continued effort to update the regulations governing associations and religious groups, which were treated identically.

Between March 12 and October 30, the government closed churches and other places of worship to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Initially and through much of the year, religious leaders supported the government’s measures and encouraged their followers to comply. In September, after seven months of closures and despite the reopening of markets, hotels, and some restaurants, religious leaders, most of them Christian, sought government permission to hold worship services. On September 27, the government arrested Pastor Jean Baptiste Moulacka for prematurely reopening his church in Libreville and released him shortly thereafter when it was determined the church was opened only for cleaning. The Ministers of Health and Interior held a joint press conference to reiterate that no place of worship could reopen without government approval and violations would not be tolerated. To alleviate these tensions, a tripartite mediation committee was created to promote dialogue between the government (Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Budget), COPIL (COVID-19 task force), and religious leaders.

On October 16, the Minister of Interior announced places of worship could reopen on Friday, October 30. Attendance was limited to 30 persons, one service a day, and no communion. Religious leaders said they were concerned that the size limitations were excessive, as some churches and mosques were built for congregations of 1,000 or more persons. Catholic leaders said they also saw the date of reopening as biased in favor of the Muslim community given the Friday Islamic Sabbath, and noted they wanted to celebrate a holiday Mass on Sunday, October 25.

The Catholic Church announced a unilateral reopening on October 25. While most Catholics stayed home and opted to wait for the government’s reopening date of October 30, small clashes occurred between congregants attempting to attend Mass and police attempting to keep churches closed. Police entered some churches to

force those already inside back out and arrested two priests. Police surrounded Catholic Archbishop of Libreville Basil Mve Engone and prevented him from speaking to congregants. A well-known trade unionist, Marcel Libama, was also arrested while trying to attend Mass. At one location, police launched two flash-bang grenades for crowd control purposes, but no one was injured.

Religious services among all religious groups restarted on October 30, and the government ceded responsibility to religious leaders for enforcing COVID-19 restrictions in their places of worship.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no large religious events were held. However, the government allowed religious leaders to use national television and radio to share their religious messages.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In January, members of the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church of Gabon celebrated a “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” with pulpit exchanges and common prayers. Since March, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic leaders met irregularly because of the COVID pandemic and official social distancing restrictions. They worked together to promote religious tolerance and advocate for the freedom to assemble while generally encouraging compliance with COVID-related mitigation measures.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy staff met with senior MOI officials, NGOs, 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.