

GABON 2022 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.”

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

U.S. embassy staff met with senior MOI officials, nongovernmental organizations, and local religious leaders to encourage continued respect for religious freedom and interreligious dialogue and activities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.3 million (midyear 2022). 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 are Christian. Of the Christian population, approximately two-thirds are Roman Catholic and one-third Protestant, which includes evangelical churches. The High Council of Islamic Affairs estimates approximately 12 percent of the population are Muslim, including many noncitizen residents with origins in West Africa. There are no published estimates of the Sunni/Shia populations, although the Sunni are predominant. The remaining 8 percent of the population practice 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 are Mwiri and Ndiobi. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jews and Baha'is.

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 (\$16). 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

The MOI reported it continued to face trouble with “one-man operations”, individuals who attempted to register themselves as representing religious groups without justification. The MOI stated that such individuals, who tended to practice a mixture of Christianity and animism, lacked “authenticity.” Religious groups said these individuals appeared to be trying to manipulate the system to get benefits they did not deserve, such as tax exoneration to import items and fee exemptions for residence permits. MOI officials stated the government’s regulatory framework governing associations and religious groups was a neutral set of laws, though some new groups experienced difficulty registering because they did not provide the appropriate documents for verification. The MOI reported charging several groups, primarily one-man operations, with fraud or sanctioned for other illegal activities, with the government using the regulatory framework to attempt to prevent further abuses.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with senior MOI officials during the year to encourage continued respect for religious freedom. Embassy staff also met with the country's head imam and with the chief religious advisor to President Ali Bongo Ondimba. They also met with the representative of the Episcopal Conference to discuss interreligious dialogue and activities. Embassy staff discussed the work of religious groups in charity and assistance operations with the representative of Caritas Gabon.