

# **GABON 2014 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 asked Muslim leaders to discourage wearing the full face veil in public due to security concerns over 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 Ministries of Interior, Human Rights, and Justice and Muslim and Christian leaders to encourage continued respect for religious freedom. Discussion topics included relations between Christians and Muslims and the registration process for religious groups.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.7 million (July 2014 estimate). Demographic studies do not track religious affiliation, and estimates from religious leaders and government agencies vary widely. Approximately 70 percent of the population is Christian. Of the Christian population, about two thirds is Roman Catholic and one third Protestant. Approximately 8 to 15 percent is Muslim, including many non-citizen residents with origins in West Africa. Approximately 10 percent of the population practices animism exclusively, and 5 percent 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**

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

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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, the minister of interior asked Muslim leaders to discourage Muslim women from wearing the full face veil in public due to what he said were concerns over the security forces’ inability to identify women who covered their faces and related security concerns over militant or terrorist Islamic groups, such as Boko Haram, which operated in nearby countries. Muslim leaders cooperated with the minister’s request.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

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

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

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U.S. embassy representatives met with senior officials from the Ministries of Interior and Human Rights, a prosecutor from the Ministry of Justice, and Muslim and Christian leaders to encourage continued respect for religious freedom and to discuss issues such as the registration process for religious groups and relations between Christians and Muslims.