



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Gabon

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 103,347 square miles, and its population is approximately 1.5 million. Major religions practiced in the country included Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism), Islam, and traditional indigenous religions. Many persons practiced both elements of Christianity and elements of traditional indigenous religions. It was estimated that approximately 73 percent of the total population, including noncitizens, practiced at least some elements of Christianity; approximately 12 percent practiced Islam (of which 80 to 90 percent are foreigners); approximately 10 percent practiced traditional indigenous religions exclusively; and approximately 5 percent practiced no religion or were atheists. The country's president was a member of the Muslim minority.

Foreign Christian missionaries were present and active in the country.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. A 1970 decree banning Jehovah's Witnesses remained in effect; however, the Government did not enforce the ban.

The Ministry of the Interior maintains an official registry of some religious groups; however, it does not register small, indigenous religious groups. The Government does not require religious groups to register but recommends that they do so to receive full constitutional protection. No financial or tax benefit is conferred by registration, but religious groups are not taxed, can import duty-free items, and are exempted from land use and construction permit fees.

Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant denominations operate primary and secondary schools in the country. These schools are required to register with the Ministry of Education, which is charged with ensuring that these religious schools meet the same standards required for public schools. The Government does not contribute funds to private schools, whether religious or secular.

Both Catholic and Protestant radio stations broadcast in the country.

The Government promotes interfaith relations by facilitating meetings of leaders of major religions. Such meetings are held periodically, and informal discussions among religious leaders are routine.

The Government celebrates some Christian and Muslim holy days as national holidays; these include Easter Sunday and Monday, Ascension Day, Assumption Day, All Saints' Day, Christmas, Eid al-Kebir, and Eid al-Fitr.

##### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government has refused to register approximately ten religious groups, nine of which were small, indigenous groups. A government decision on the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses has been pending for several years without resolution. In practice, the Government allows Jehovah's Witnesses to assemble and practice their religion. In addition, the Government has permitted Jehovah's Witnesses to proselytize.

The government television stations accorded free transmission time to the Catholic Church, some Protestant congregations, and Islamic mosques. Some Protestant denominations alleged that the government television station does not accord free airtime to minority religious groups. Protestants have alleged in the past that the armed forces favor Catholics and Muslims in hiring and promotion. Some Protestant pastors complain that local officials discriminated against them by making it difficult to obtain building permits to construct churches, charging visa fees on volunteer medical and religious workers not imposed on other denominations, and demanding customs fees for aid materials. Missionaries expressed concern that foreigners holding valid visas that describe their profession as "pastor" have been denied entry unless they have an additional entry permit issued in advance by immigration. However, there were no reports that any applicant was denied a permit.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. There were no reports of interreligious violence or intrareligious incidents during the period covered by this report.

Practitioners of some traditional indigenous religions inflicted bodily harm on other persons during the period covered by the report. Two adolescent boys found murdered in February 2005 were widely believed to have been the victims of ritual killings. Parents and newspaper articles alleged that seven other males may have been the victims of ritual killings in 2005. Three were reported killed in March, one each in May and July, and two more in December. No information was made public on the investigation, if any, into the circumstances of these crimes or possible suspects. The Ministry of the Interior stated that violence and bodily harm to others in the practice of a traditional religion is a criminal offense and is prosecuted vigorously; however, no information about such prosecutions or their results was available.

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

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials meet regularly with leaders of the Catholic Church, the Islamic Superior Council, and Protestant churches. The embassy maintains contacts with the Ministry of Interior and the minister of human rights to discuss the general state of religion in the country. The embassy also maintains close contacts with various Christian missionary groups in the country.

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