



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **84.7%**
- Muslims : **10.2%**
- Ethnoreligionists : **3.2%**
- Agnostics : **1.3%**
- Others : **0.6%**

1.763.000

267.667 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Gabon is ruled by the 1991 constitution, which was modified in August 2003 and in January 2018. The latest constitutional reform did not modify article 1, which (in section 2) enshrines “freedom of conscience, thought, opinion, expression, communication, the free practice of religion, [which] are guaranteed to all, under the reservation of respect of public order”.^[1] Because of this legal provision, the Ministry of Internal Affairs banned a Church named “Plenitude Exode” in April 2012, after receiving numerous reports of public nuisance relating to noisy prayer services held nightly.^[2]

The constitution affirms the secular character of the state. Article 1 (section 13) guarantees “the right to form associations [. . .] as well as religious communities [. . .] under conditions fixed by the law”, and that “religious communities [can] conduct and administer their own affairs in an independent manner, under reserve of respect of the principles of national sovereignty [and] public order”. Finally, all acts of discrimination on any basis, including religious affiliation, are forbidden.

Official registration of religious groups is not compulsory, although the government advises religious groups to do so in order to enjoy full constitutional protection. The Ministry of Interior keeps a record of all registered religious groups, which are not required to apply for building permits. Such groups can apply for a tax-free certificate once they get official recognition as non-profit organisations. Should a religious group not comply with these requirements, it can still carry out its activities, but it will be required to pay duties for any imports and will not be exempted from taxes.

Although Gabon is a member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (because Islam is the religion of its leaders), it is constitutionally a secular state. It was the first African nation to sign an agreement with the Holy See in 1977, which is still in force.^[3] This accord gives full legal recognition to the Catholic Church and all its institutions and recognises the legality of marriages contracted under canon law.

The main religious groups – Catholic, Protestant and Muslim – have the right to own and administer primary and secondary schools. These facilities must be registered with the Ministry of Education.

The following religious festivals are observed as national public holidays: All Saints'; Ascension; Assumption of Our Lady; Christmas; Easter Sunday; Easter Monday; Pentecost; Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Kebir.

Incidents

Following the presidential elections of 27th August 2016, violence broke out between supporters of the ruling party that claimed victory for President Ali Bongo and the opposition, which challenged the results. In a letter dated 6th September 2016, signed by the chairman of the Bishops' Conference, Bishop Mathieu Madega of Mouila, Gabon's prelates denounced the "lack of truth in the democratic process and the non-respect of human rights"^[4] Many members of the clergy and prominent leaders of the laity felt that the bishops' message fell short of directly censuring the serious irregularities recorded during the elections as well as the harsh repression that ensued against members of the opposition. Many Catholics felt that confrontation with the authorities had been avoided by the bishops' failure to mention electoral fraud in their statement.^[5]

After the elections, Abbé Dimitri Ayatebe Ename, a diocesan priest from Libreville, and Director of Studies at the Saint Jean Minor Seminary, gave a homily on 16th October 2016 denouncing the country's "dictatorial, cynical, obscure, perverse and murderous"^[6] political system. Four days later, on 20th October, Lambert-Noël Matha, Minister of Internal Affairs, sent a letter of complaint to the rector of the seminary, Abbé Laurent Manvoula, sending a copy to the Archbishop Basile Mve Engore of Libreville. The minister accused Fr Ayatebe of causing offence to the institutions of the Republic. He said the priest had referred to the electoral results "in a sectarian manner"^[7]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Interfaith dialogue among senior Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic leaders concluded that there were no significant societal pressures or actions against religious freedom. Leaders of all three faiths met regularly, attended each other's main festivals and worked together to promote religious tolerance and defend freedom of religion. The interfaith dialogue and activities included discussions of religious issues. Before the August presidential elections, the leaders of all three major faiths issued a joint appeal for domestic peace and interfaith dialogue.^[8]

In common with many other countries in the central African region, Gabon has experienced growing political and social tensions over the past decade. So far however, no trends have been detected suggesting that these circumstances could have negative effects on freedom of religion, a right that the country has always upheld. It seems that respect for freedom of religion is likely to continue.

Endnotes / Sources

[1] Gabon's Constitution of 1991 with Amendments through 1997, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Gabon_1997.pdf), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Gabon_1997.pdf (accessed 11 February 2018).

[2] 'Pollution sonore à Libreville: le silence des autorités', Gabon Review, 21 February 2013, <http://www.bdpmoam.org/articles/2013/02/21/pollution-sonore-a-libreville-le-silence-des-autorites/> (accessed 9 February 2018).

[3] Mgr Lajolo, 'Historique des concordats et accords conclus par le Saint-Siège', Zenit, 15 November 2005, <https://fr.zenit.org/articles/historique-des-concordats-et-accords-conclus-par-le-saint-siege/> (accessed 9 February 2018).

[4] Mathieu Madega Lebouakehan, 'Élection présidentielle Gabon/ Message des évêques du Gabon', Église catholique au Gabon, 6 septembre 2016, <http://www.eglisecatholique-gabon.org/election-presidentielle-gabon-message-des- eveques-du-gabon.html> (accessed 9 February 2018).

[5] Interview on 12 January 2018 with a Catholic priest working in Libreville.

[6] Loic Ntoutoume, 'L'abbé Dimitri Ayatebe dans le collimateur de Lambert-Noël Matha', Gabon Review, 30 octobre 2016, <http://gabonreview.com/blog/labbe-dimitri-ayatebe-collimateur-de-lambert-noel-matha/> (accessed 9 February 2018).

[7] Ntoutoume, *ibid.*

[8] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 'Gabon', Report on International Religious Freedom for 2016, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 9 February 2018).