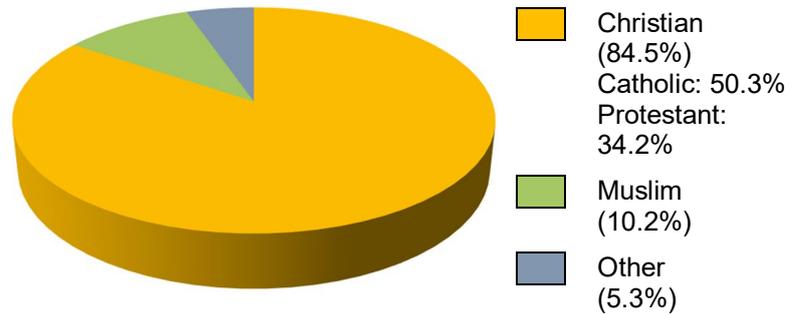
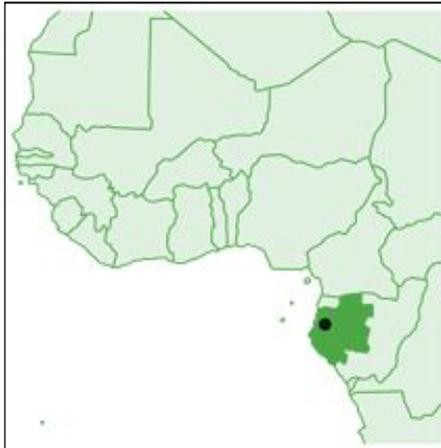


GABON



Area: 267,667 km ²	Population: 1.8 million	Political system: Autocracy	Major Language(s): French
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Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The 1991 Constitution of the Republic of Gabon, modified in August 2003, recognizes in its first article “the freedom of conscience, of thought, of opinion, of expression, of communication and the free practice of one’s religion, notwithstanding the respect to public order”. It was because of this legal reservation that, in April 2012, the Ministry of Internal Affairs banned a church named “Plenitude Exode”, after receiving numerous reports of public disturbances because of high levels of noise during their night prayer services.¹ The constitution also enshrines the secular character of the state. The same article number one guarantees “the right to form religious associations and communities under the conditions established by the law”, and it states that “religious communities shall administer their own affairs independently, under reserve of the respect to the national sovereignty and the public order”. Finally, all acts of discrimination – including religious freedom violations – are forbidden, regardless of the cause.

No official registration of religious groups is compulsory, although the government advises religious denominations to do so in order to enjoy full constitutional protection. The Ministry of Interior keeps a record of all registered religious groups. These are exempt from having to apply for construction permits. They can also apply for a tax-free certificate once they obtain official recognition as non-profit organisations. Should a religious group not comply with these procedures, it will still be able to carry out its activities, but it will be required to pay customs’ duties for any imports and it will not be exempted from paying taxes.

Gabon is a member of the Islamic Conference (on the grounds that its leaders are Muslims). However, despite being constitutionally a secular state, it was the first African nation to sign a full agreement with the Holy See, in 1977, which is still in force.² This document recognizes full juridical rights to the Catholic Church and all its institutions, and it grants civil recognition to canonical marriages.

The main religious groups, Catholic, Protestant and Muslims, own and run Primary and Secondary schools. These centers 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

In recent years, as political tensions have erupted in Gabon, relations between the government and Archbishop Basil Mvé of Libreville have soured. The archbishop used to have excellent relationships with the premier, Omar Bongo. Since his election in 2009, Ali Bongo is reported to have looked at the Catholic Church with suspicion, as a stronghold of the Fang ethnic group, the largest in the country and to which many opposition leaders belong.³

One of the Catholic Church's privileges is that it is granted free air time on State TV, a perk that has often been contested by other religious minority groups who do not enjoy this right. Many of Gabon's political leaders have traditionally belonged to Masonic groups and this is seen as explaining their neutral attitude to religious groups.⁴

A 1970 decree banning the Jehovah's Witnesses continues to be in force, at least theoretically. However, in practice the members of this group practise their religion without any restriction and can engage in proselytism.

On 20 December 2014, the Front Uni de l'Opposition pour l'Alternance organized a demonstration in Libreville to protest against President Ali Bongo. The security forces dispersed the crowds at Carrefour Rio and some of the opposition leaders took refuge at the neighboring Saint Michel church, in the Nkembo neighbourhood. The Police were reported to have entered the church and used force to remove the demonstrators from the compound and arrest them.⁵

Prospects for freedom of religion

In common with many other countries from the Central African region, Gabon is experiencing growing political and social tensions. However, no trends have been detected so far to show that these circumstances have had a negative effect on freedom of religion, a right which the country has always upheld.

¹ <http://gabonreview.com/blog/pollution-sonore-a-libreville-le-silence-des-autorites/>

² <http://www.zenit.org/fr/articles/historique-des-concordats-et-accords-conclus-par-le-saintsiegel>

³ Interview of the author with several Catholic priests in Libreville

⁴ <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articles/Dossier/JA2726p022.xml0/congo-tchad-gabon-togoafrique-les-nouveaux-francs-macons.html>

⁵ <http://observers.france24.com/fr/20141222-infos-intox-week-end-protestation-libreville>