

## Gabonese Muslims

Muslims make up about 1-5% of the whole population in Gabon, one of the smallest countries of the continent located in Western Africa. Half of the country's population consists of evangelized indigenous people. One-third of the population continue to follow African religions. The majority of the Muslim population consists of Muslim migrants who are not part of the indigenous population. The most important reason for this is that the country began to attract a foreign labor force and investors, especially after the 1970s when oil was discovered in the area.

While it is populated predominantly by Christians, Gabon has been a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation since 1974. This is mainly due to desired economic relations with rich Arabic countries on the one hand, and the then president Omar Bongo's adoption of Islam in 1973 on the other. These relations developed along economic lines have borne fruit in the political arena as well, and Gabon has sided with Islamic countries in numerous matters, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Following the president's adoption of Islam, the situation of the Muslim minority in the country rapidly improved. The presence of bureaucrats who professed Islam strengthened the position of Muslims. After ruling the country as a one-man dictatorship until 2009, Omar Bongo was succeeded by his son.

It is very difficult to tell when exactly Islam reached Gabon for the first time. Nevertheless, it is estimated that it was in the 11th century when proselytizing and preaching groups roaming the West coast of Africa during the Almoravid rule of Morocco reached Gabon for the first time. About five centuries later, the arrival of Muslim merchants from the Niger Delta and Mali contributed to the Fang people's conversion to Islam, and to the Islamization of the Fang community in Gabon. In addition to this, the Islamization of the Fulani in neighboring Cameroon encouraged the related populations in neighboring Gabon to convert to Islam.

Despite these small steps of change, the Western influence that began in the 16th century brought Gabon under European colonial rule along with the rest of the West coast of Africa. Becoming an official French colony in 1885, the country entered a dark period of colonization. The turbulent independence process that followed the colonial rule which lasted until 1960 saw military coups and frequently rising tension from the very beginning. Since 1967, the country has been ruled by the Muslim Bongo family, still in power now.

Despite having a Muslim president, because of the French influence behind the scenes, Gabon has never managed to develop completely independent policies. The elites in power have been trying to retain a policy of balance between France and Muslim countries.

The first days of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are official holidays in the country. The Muslim minority has the right to make religious broadcasts once a week on state television. This usually happens in the form of broadcasting the Friday khutbah (public preaching) from a mosque. There are no obstacles in the country to Muslims establishing their own educational institutions. One of the most important conditions that applies to Islamic schools is that the education they offer must not be below the standard of a public school.

As religious minorities in Gabon are dealt with as communities once they have reached a certain number, 34 Islamic communities are counted as being dispersed all over the country. To amend this dispersion, a congress was held for the first time in 2004 in the capital, Libreville, to unite the Muslims in the country. Managing to convoke all the different organizations, the congress ended with the joint decision of all the groups that make up the Muslim minority to join forces. Efforts are being made currently toward the implementation of this decision.

Numerous Muslim groups belonging to different sects and ideologies took an initiative rarely witnessed in African countries and signed the joint declaration of the *Gabon Muslim Community Constitution*. Relations between Muslim groups are regulated through this constitution. When competition between the groups give rise to disagreements, even though this is subject to debate, the precepts written here are

implemented, as the text has acquired general acceptance.

*The High Council of Islamic Affairs of Gabon* , which represents the country's Muslims, helps to bring different groups together, as well as engender relations between the state and the Muslim minority community. There is also a general secretariat which acts under the remit of the president as an adviser regarding policies relating to the Muslims. This general secretariat has direct power over the council.

Making efforts to ensure the peaceful cohabitation of diverse ethnic and religious communities, the Gabonese administration sometimes holds meetings for inter-religious dialogue to bring together groups of different faiths and to exchange ideas.

In terms of economic wealth, the country's power surpasses the African average. The per capita income of Gabon is relatively high in comparison to many African countries. However, as one of the most basic problems of the country, income inequality creates a major discrepancy in the distribution of this wealth. The problem of social justice is one of the major risks in the country where there is a large income gap.

The socioeconomic situation of Muslims in the country presents a very inconsistent case. Muslims who belong to the civil and military elite have a high economic status along with their social status. However, Muslims living in the slums as unskilled workers or in rural areas live in very poor conditions.

Surface area: 267,667 km<sup>2</sup>

Population: 1,672,597

Muslim population: 1-5%

Capital: Libreville

Official language: French