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USDOS – US Department of State

2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ghana

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, stipulates that individuals are free to profess and practice their religion, and does not designate a state religion. Registration is required for religious groups to have legal status. In March President Nana Akufo-Addo unveiled plans to build a new national interdenominational cathedral on land provided by the government. Critics, including some religious leaders, questioned the cost and details of the financing, and an opposition political party member filed a lawsuit to block construction on constitutional grounds. In June the president spoke at an Eid al-Fitr celebration and declared, “Our country stands unique in West Africa, both in terms of inter- and intra-religious cooperation... We ought to guard this tradition of cooperation and tolerance jealously.” In August the president met with religious leaders to explore ways to ensure all religious institutions pay statutory taxes required of them on their commercial activities, stating the need for government and faith-based organizations to meet periodically on issues of mutual interest.

Muslim and Christian leaders continued to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and tolerance, and reported sustained communication among themselves on religious matters and ways to address issues of concern.

The embassy urged the government to restart dialogue with religious communities regarding concerns over religious accommodations in publicly funded, religiously affiliated schools. The embassy discussed religious freedom and tolerance with religious leaders and community organizations and sponsored several events to promote interfaith dialogue and tolerance. The embassy provided funding again to the Islamic Peace and Security Council of Ghana, which held a series of lectures on good governance and encouraged Muslim leaders to take a more active role in governance. The objective was to increase their visibility in the public sphere and promote tolerance of Muslims generally. In May the U.S. Ambassador hosted a Ramadan event at a local school with religious leaders from various faiths where embassy officials distributed food kits to schoolchildren to enable them to break the fast with their families. During the program, the Ambassador emphasized the importance of nurturing interfaith understanding and protecting religious freedom as foundations of peace and security.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 28.1 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2010 government census (the most recent available), approximately 71 percent of the population is Christian, 18 percent Muslim, 5 percent adheres to indigenous or animistic religious beliefs, and 6 percent belongs to other religious groups or has no religious beliefs. Smaller religious groups include the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Eckankar, and Rastafarianism.

Christian denominations include Roman Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, Mennonite, Presbyterian, Evangelical Presbyterian Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran, Eden Revival Church International, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh-day Adventist, Pentecostal, Baptist, African independent churches, the Society of Friends (Quaker), and numerous nondenominational Christian groups.

Muslim communities include Sunnis, Ahmadiyya, Shia, and Sufis (Tijaniyah and Qadiriyya orders).

Many individuals who identify as Christian or Muslim also practice some aspects of indigenous beliefs. There are syncretic groups that combine elements of Christianity or Islam with traditional beliefs. Zetahil, a belief system unique to the country, combines elements of Christianity and Islam.

There is no significant link between ethnicity and religion, but geography is often associated with religious identity. Christians reside throughout the country; the majority of Muslims reside in the northern regions and in the urban centers of Accra, Kumasi, and Sekondi-Takoradi; and most followers of traditional religious beliefs reside in rural areas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for individuals' freedom to profess and practice any religion. These rights may be limited for stipulated reasons including defense, public safety, public health, or the management of essential services.

Religious groups must register with the Office of the Registrar General in the Ministry of Justice to receive formal government recognition and status as a legal entity, but there is no penalty for not registering. The registration requirement for religious groups is the same as for nongovernmental organizations. To register, groups must fill out a form and pay a fee. Most indigenous religious groups do not register.

According to law, registered religious groups are exempt from paying taxes on nonprofit religious, charitable, and educational activities. Religious groups are required to pay progressive taxes, on a pay-as-earned basis, on for-profit business activities.

The Ministry of Education includes compulsory religious and moral education in the national public education curriculum. There is no provision to opt out of these courses, which incorporate perspectives from Islam and Christianity. There is also an Islamic education unit within the ministry responsible for coordinating all public education activities for Muslim communities. The ministry permits private religious schools; however, they must follow the prescribed curriculum set by the ministry. International schools, such as those that do not follow the government curriculum, are exempt from these requirements.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Muslim leaders continued to report that some publicly funded Christian mission schools required female Muslim students to remove their hijabs and Muslim students to participate in Christian worship services, despite a Ministry of Education policy prohibiting these practices. For example, Muslim leaders reported three examples of schools that required Muslim students to participate in church services, saying they were compulsory school gatherings. Similarly, there were continued reports that some publicly funded Muslim mission schools required female Christian students to wear the hijab.

Government officials leading meetings, receptions, and state funerals offered Christian and Muslim prayers and, occasionally, traditional invocations. President Nana Akufo-Addo, a Christian, and Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia, a Muslim, continued to emphasize the importance of peaceful religious coexistence in public remarks. For example, in June President Akufo-Addo spoke at an Eid al-Fitr celebration and declared, “Our country stands unique in West Africa, both in terms of inter- and intra-religious cooperation... We ought to guard this tradition of cooperation and tolerance jealously.” He also cautioned his fellow citizens to be wary of “troublemakers and hate preachers” who might sow disunity.

In March the president unveiled design plans for an interdenominational Christian cathedral, to be built in Accra. Several groups, including Christian ones, spoke against the proposal, citing reasons such as wasting public lands, the relocation of judges residing on the plot, and undue government involvement in the affairs of religious groups. The Coalition of Muslim Organizations issued a statement saying it did not object to the construction of a cathedral but government should not play a role. National Chief Imam spokesperson Sheikh Shaibu Aremeyaw said an interfaith edifice would have been more appropriate. The president defended the plan as “a priority among priorities,” saying the country needed “a symbol that the Ghanaian nation can rally behind.” The president’s liaison for the cathedral denied the government was playing favorites, citing the government’s donation of land for the construction of the national mosque, financed by international donors. An opposition political party member filed a lawsuit in August to block construction of the cathedral on constitutional grounds.

During the year, the president emphasized the importance he placed on government representatives meeting with religious leaders on matters of mutual interest. In August he convened a closed-door session with religious leaders to explore ways (such as establishing a regulatory body) to ensure all religious institutions pay statutory taxes required of them on their commercial activities. The Ghana Revenue Authority planned to tax income churches receive from business activities, but not from offerings and donations. The former head of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference backed the plan, cautioning, however, against a “blanket” tax on churches.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslim and Christian leaders reported continued regular dialogue between their respective governing bodies and the National Peace Council, an independent, statutory institution with religious reconciliation as part of its mandate. The council did not convene any formal meetings with religious figures. Faith leaders, however, reported sustained communication among themselves on religious matters and ways to address issues of concern or sensitivity. While there were some reports of supervisors directing Muslim nursing students to remove their veils in the ward, such moves were not authorized or directed by faith leaders or government figures.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives discussed with officials from the Ministry of Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration the importance of mutual understanding, religious tolerance, and respect for all religious groups. The embassy urged the government to restart dialogue with religious communities regarding concerns about religious accommodations in publicly funded, religiously affiliated schools. Embassy officials also discussed these subjects with a broad range of other actors, including Muslim civil society organizations and Christian groups. Although in previous years the embassy engaged Education Service officials about the importance of facilitating religious accommodation in schools, requests for a meeting with the agency went unanswered.

The embassy provided funding again to the Islamic Peace and Security Council of Ghana, which held a series of lectures on good governance and encouraged Muslim leaders to take a more active role in governance. The objective was to increase their visibility in the public sphere and promote tolerance of Muslims generally.

In May the Ambassador hosted a Ramadan event with religious leaders from various faiths during which he emphasized the importance of nurturing interfaith understanding and protecting religious freedom as foundations of peace and security. During the program, embassy officials distributed food kits to several dozen Muslim schoolchildren to enable them to break the fast with their families. In August the Charge d’Affaires presented the customary gifts of a ram, oil, and rice to the

national chief imam as part of embassy outreach for Eid al-Adha. In his remarks, the Charge recognized the important role of religious institutions in facilitating interfaith dialogue and promoting peace, prosperity, and development in the country.

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