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Ghana

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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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; however, tensions sometimes arose between different branches of the same faith, as well as between Christian and traditional faiths. A number of governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) promoted interfaith and intrafaith understanding.

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 approximately 238,538 square miles and an estimated population of approximately 21 million. According to the 2000 government census approximately 69 percent of the population is Christian, 15.6 percent is Muslim, and 15.4 percent adheres to traditional indigenous religions or other faiths. The Muslim community has protested these figures, asserting that the Muslim population is closer to 30 percent. Pentecostal and charismatic churches are reported to be the fastest growing denominations in Ghana. Approximately 6.2 percent of the population does not affiliate itself with a particular religion.

Other religious groups included the Baha'i faith, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Ninchiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai, Sri Sathya Sai Baba Sera, Sat Sang, Eckankar, the Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna, and Rastafarianism. There were also some separatist or spiritual churches that included elements of Christianity and traditional beliefs such as magic and divination. Zetahil, a practice unique to Ghana, combines elements of Christianity and Islam. There were no statistics available for the percentage of atheists.

There was no significant tension between traditional and mainstream religion, rather, there was some degree of overlap in religious practice as traditional religion still had a strong hold on society and in many cases coexisted with formal religions. Many Christians and Muslims, for example, held traditional religious beliefs while also adhering to mainstream religious doctrine or practice. Similarly, many Catholics and Protestants also attended Pentecostal or charismatic church services.

Christian subgroups include Roman Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, Mennonite, Evangelical Presbyterian, Presbyterian, African Methodist Episcopal Zionist, Christian Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, F'eden, numerous charismatic faiths, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventist, Pentecostals, Baptist, and the Society of Friends (Quakers). Christianity often includes an overlay of traditional beliefs.

Traditional indigenous religions include a belief in a Supreme Being, referred to by the Akan ethnic group as Nyame or by the Ewe ethnic group as Mawu, and lesser gods who act as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings. Veneration of ancestors also is characteristic of traditional indigenous religions, because ancestors provide a link between the Supreme Being and the living and at times may be reincarnated. Religious leaders of these traditional groups are commonly referred to as priests and are trained in the arts of healing and divination. The priests typically operate shrines to the Supreme Deity or to one of the lesser gods, and they rely upon the donations of the public to maintain the shrines and for their own maintenance. Afrikania, also known as the Afrikan Renaissance Mission, actively supports traditional religious practices. Afrikania often criticizes the Government, foreign diplomatic missions, and NGOs, contending that they corrupt traditional values and impose foreign religious beliefs. Afrikania leaders claimed the movement had more than four million followers; however, no independent confirmation of the claim was available.

Three dominant Islamic traditions were present in the country: Tijanis (a Sufi sect found in West Africa), Wahhabi-oriented Ahlussuna (made up of the Ahlussuna Wal-Jam-A and the less conservative Ahlussuna Majilis), and the Ahmadis. A small number of Shi'a were also present.

There was not a significant link between ethnicity and religion; however, geography was often associated with religious identity. The majority of the Muslim population was concentrated in northern areas as well as in the urban centers of Accra, Kumasi, Sekondi-Takoradi, Tamale, and Wa, while the majority of the followers of traditional indigenous religions resided in rural areas. Christians lived throughout the country.

Foreign missionaries, including Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Muslim, and Mormon groups, operated freely in the country. Catholic missionaries were most numerous followed by Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Methodist and Presbyterian missionaries. In addition to proselytizing, missionaries were active in health, education, skills/vocational training and social activities.

Of the foreign missionaries present in the country, Saudi Arabian missionaries were the most numerous. They were followed by Iranian, Kuwaiti and Algerian missionaries. They practiced *Dawah* or evangelism and were active in education, cultural, health and agricultural practices.

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. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

Government employees, including the president, are required to swear an oath upon taking office; however, this oath can be either religious or secular, depending on the preference of the individual. The Government recognizes Christian, Muslim, and secular holidays.

There is no government body that regulates or oversees religious affairs as all religious bodies are independent institutions; however, religious institutions that wished to have formal government recognition were required to register with the Registrar General's Department. The registration requirement for religious bodies at the Office of the Registrar General was the same for any NGO. The organization paid approximately \$0.56 (five thousand cedis) for the application form, approximately \$4 (thirty five thousand cedis) for the registration form, and approximately \$69 (610 thousand cedis) for the registration. Applicants were required to renew their registration annually for approximately \$17 (150 thousand cedis) Registration was only a formality, and there were no reports that the Government denied registration to any group. Most traditional religions, with the exception of the Afrikania Mission, did not register.

The Government did not provide financial support for any religious organization. Formally registered religions were exempt from paying taxes on ecclesiastical, charitable, and educational activities that do not generate income; however, religious organizations were required to pay progressive taxes, on a pay-as-you-earn basis, on business activities that generate income. No discriminatory tax treatment towards religious groups was reported during the reporting period.

Schools in Ghana were first established by Christian and Muslim missionaries. When the Government became a stakeholder in education, mission-run schools partnered with the Government to establish a standard education. Missionaries relinquished some control of the schools through this partners; however, the head position of many schools continued to be reserved for a member of the same faith as the school. Additionally, the majority of a school's management team was usually comprised of members who adhere to the same faith as that of the school. All denominations designated education management units to monitor activities in each of their schools.

Public schools could be either day schools or boarding schools and were supported by the Government through the disbursement of grants, paying salaries of employees of these schools and providing learning as well as teaching materials. Christian students attending government-administered boarding schools were required to attend a nondenominational service on Sundays. Muslim students in these boarding schools were exempted from the service and were permitted to practice daily prayers. Most schools accommodated special meal arrangements for fasting Muslim students during Ramadan. Private schools were run by individuals, communities and, in some cases, NGOs.

Religious and Moral Education is a compulsory subject for every child in both public and private schools at the basic or primary level. At this level, religious instruction was general and did not focus on any single religion. At the secondary level, religious studies was an optional subject and differed from the Religious and Moral education classes taken at the primary level. Students could choose between Christian Religious Studies, Islamic Religious Studies, or Traditional African Religion regardless of whether they attend a private or public school. Such options were not influenced by government funding as the Government did not discriminate in its allocation of resources for any of these courses. There were nine other private, secular schools and five public universities already functioning in the country. The

country's first Catholic university opened in 2004.

The Government often took steps to promote interfaith understanding. At government meetings and receptions, there was usually a multi-denominational invocation led by religious leaders from various faiths. In April 2006, President John A. Kufuor met with a visiting delegation from the International Religious Liberty Association, which held its second Pan-African, International Religious Liberty Congress (IRLC) in Accra during that time. The minister of fisheries opened the conference. President Kufuor met the delegation and expressed his government's commitment to ensuring religious freedom.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Ministry of Education regulations prohibited authorities of public schools from compelling students of minority faiths to worship with the majority religious groups in school. The minister of education also continued to direct schools to respect the religious rights of all students. Religious freedom was generally respected in schools and was not seen as being a function of the type of school.

Muslim students generally experienced significant religious freedom in public schools, in comparison to previous years. In a few cases reported by the Director of the Islamic Education Unit in the Greater Accra Region, some school authorities made special efforts to ensure the freedom of Muslim students to practice their religious beliefs by providing, for instance, areas for Muslim worship.

Despite official policies promoting free religious practice in schools, Muslim and Seventh-day Adventist students complained of occasional insensitivity towards religious obligations by some school administrators. For example, some school administrations reportedly did not accommodate religious practices when regulating school attire or when scheduling examinations on their holy days of obligation (Fridays for Muslims and Saturdays for Seventh-day). Also, there were isolated instances in which bans on female head-scarves were introduced into some schools. Some Muslim students felt discriminated against by these policies, since they noted that the same restriction was not placed on Catholic nuns who dressed in accordance with their religious order.

In November 2005, 149 students of The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church at the University of Ghana, Legon, took legal action in the Accra Fast Track High Court. The legal action was an attempt to restrain the university from requiring the students to take examinations on Saturdays. Although the SDA students noted that the university provided accommodations for student athletes scheduled to take exams on Saturdays, the High Court threw out their ex-parte motion on the grounds that, if granted, it could affect a larger number of other students beyond those requesting these accommodations. The court also highlighted that, in addition to the two-thirds of the student body who took exams on weekends, Muslims took exams on Fridays. Concluding that the university had not shown discrimination or favoritism to a particular group, and noting that SDA students had not established irreparable loss as a definitive consequence of taking Saturday exams, the court sided with the university and denied the students' request to reschedule Saturday exams. While various individuals and organizations, including the World Headquarters for Seventh-day Adventists, Ghana Union of Seventh-day Adventists, and the U.S embassy intervened on the students' behalf, the university has not yet agreed to make any additional accommodations or compromise and future action appears unlikely. At the end of the period covered by this report, school officials had the discretion regarding whether and how to accommodate holy days or obligation of any religious group when scheduling exams.

Because of increasing concerns about vandalism and cheating in schools, school administrators attempted to target sources of "misbehavior" among students during the reporting period. Some administrators attributed acts of misbehavior to occultism and attempted to regulate student behavior in this regard. By the end of the reporting period, there was no official government policy targeting students perceived as partaking in occultism.

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

Relations between the various religious communities were generally amicable and spokespersons for these communities often advocate tolerance towards different religions; however, there was occasional tension among some religious groups.

Public discussion continued over religious worship versus traditional practices and respect for the rights and customs of others in a diverse society. While some religious leaders actively discouraged religiously motivated violence, discrimination, or harassment; others, particularly lay persons associated with evangelical groups, continued to preach

intolerance for other religions such as Islam and traditional religions. In an address during the first quarter of 2006, the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Reverend Dr. Yaw Frimpong-Manso, described the practice whereby Christian leaders who honor the programs and share the same platforms with non-Christians and practitioners of other religions as dangerous.

In June 2006 the media reported physical tensions between the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) and Ga traditional authority, a chieftaincy group for ethnic Gas in the Accra area, when members from each group physically confronted each other. This incident developed when the CAC violated the annual monthly ban on drumming imposed by traditional authorities in Accra. For years CAC's use of drumming and other musical instruments in their services was a source of tension between this group and the Ga traditional authority and in 2001 resulted in violence.

In December 2005 the Volta Regional Police Command banned the annual convention of the Apostles Revelation Society at Tadzewu, the headquarters of the Apostles Revelation Society church. The police took this step to deter a possible outbreak of violence expected to erupt between factions within the group. After the natural death of its founder, the group has been beset by a series of conflicts between factions, leading to court suits, threats, and skirmishes. This is the second year the convention has been banned. In December 2004, the Volta Regional Security Council (REGSEC) banned the 2004 annual convention for the same reasons.

Some Muslims continued to feel a sense of political and social exclusion as Christianity continued to pervade many aspects of society. Factors such as the token representation of Muslims in national leadership positions, the deferral to only Christian-oriented prayers in public settings, and the ubiquity of Christian slogans contributed to this perception of marginalization and discrimination within the Muslim community.

In addition to Islam, some religious practices deriving from indigenous customs also faced discrimination. Trokosi, a religious practice indigenous to the southern Volta region, involves pledging family members, most commonly teenagers but sometimes children under the age of ten, to extended service at a shrine to atone for another family member's sins. Trokosis (the pledged family member) help with the upkeep of these shrines and pour libations during prayers. Trokosis sometimes live near shrines, often with extended family members, during their period of service, which lasts from a few months to three years.

Reports on the number of women and girls bound to various Trokosi shrines varied; however, a shrine rarely had more than four Trokosis serving their atonements at any one time. According to credible reports from international observers and local leaders, there were no more than fifty girls serving at Trokosi shrines throughout the Volta Region. Reports by local leaders, district authorities, shrine priests, elders, and human rights activists indicated that the incidence of Trokosi was declining considerably.

According to human rights groups, the practice decreased in recent years because other belief systems gained followers, and fetish priests who died were not replaced. Adherents of Trokosi described it as a practice based on traditional African religious beliefs; however, the Government did not recognize it as a religion.

Although local officials portray Trokosis as a traditional practice that was not abusive, some NGOs maintained that Trokosis were subject to sexual exploitation and forced labor. Meanwhile, supporters of traditional African religions, such as the Afrikania Renaissance Mission, said that these NGOs misrepresent their beliefs and regarded their campaigns against Trokosi as religious persecution. Government agencies, such as CHRAJ, had at times actively campaigned against it.

Belief in witchcraft remained strong in many areas. Rural women continued to be banished by traditional village authorities or their families for suspected witchcraft. Most accused witches were older women, often widows, who were identified by fellow villagers as the cause of difficulties, such as illness, crop failure, or financial misfortune. Many of these banished women were sent to live in "witch camps," villages in the north of the country populated by suspected witches. The women did not face formal legal sanction if they return home; however, most feared that they would be beaten or lynched if they returned to their villages. Fearing violence against them, many women accused of being witches did not pursue legal action to challenge charges against them and return to their community.

This practice was prevalent mainly in the Northern, Upper East, and Upper West regions of the country. While there were no official figures on the number of accused women living in "witch camps," NGOs conducting sensitization workshops in the North, estimate this number to be near 3,000. Even though the number of named witches present in the camps was quite high, the numbers had stabilized over the past few years and were slowly decreasing. Outreach and community sensitization by various NGOs have made considerable progress in rehabilitating the accused women back into their communities and preventing acts of violence against them.

There were several cases of lynching and assault of accused witches although the law provides protection for alleged witches. The Government, under the auspices of the Domestic Violence Victim Support Unit, continued to prosecute persons who committed acts of violence against suspected witches and also refrained from charging anyone solely on the basis of witchcraft. In September Yendi police arrested a Tamabo farmer for allegedly cudgeling to death a woman suspected of being a witch. In August 2004 the court sentenced a man to death for killing his wife, who he believed was a witch. Both cases remained open at the end of the period covered by this reporting period.

Human rights activists continued to express concerns about prayer camps in which individuals believed to be possessed by evil spirits are chained for weeks, physically assaulted, and denied food and water. In 2003, Youth Alert Network found that 80 percent of the fifty Volta Region prayer camps it surveyed engaged in such practices. Among the victims were family members who were blamed for misfortunes and the mentally ill, some reportedly as young as six years old. Families sent these victims to be exorcised of evil spirits. The victims were held at the camps until they were considered healed. Media reports indicate that these abusive practices extend to the Greater Accra, Eastern, Central, Western, Ashanti, and Brong Ahafo regions. CHRAJ, the Department of Social Welfare, and the National Commission for Civic Education agreed to investigate, but were hindered by a lack of resources and staff. At the end of the period covered by this report, no investigations were initiated.

As in the past, there were several cases of parents who denied minors medical treatment and polio immunization because medical assistance was incompatible with their religious beliefs. In April 2005, health personnel and volunteers were unable to vaccinate children for polio whose parents belonged to the Jesus Christ Apostolic Faith Church, at Agona Asafo in the Central Region, a church which has persistently refused to allow its children to be immunized. During the same month, government authorities took a 14-year-old girl from parents who belonged to this denomination when they would not allow their daughter to have an operation to remove a potentially fatal tumor. Following a court order secured by the Department of Social Welfare for her custody, a successful surgery was performed on the girl. She was being cared for by the Shelter for Abused Children at Osu. The shelter is under the supervision of the Department of Social Welfare and receives funding from philanthropists.

Unlike in previous years when anti-Semitic statements were expressed in two of the country's weekly newspapers, no anti-Semitic statements were known to be reported throughout the country.

Relations across different Muslim groups continued to improve during the reporting period, particularly between the Tijanniya and Ahlussuna Muslim groups. In the past, relations between these two groups were contentious due to their doctrinal differences. Recently formed NGOs, such as the Coalition of Muslim Organizations and Ghana Congress of Religions and Peace, contributed to these improved relations by coordinating dialogues and collaborations amongst different Muslim groups.

The Coalition of Muslim Organizations (COMOG), an umbrella group for various Muslim organizations, was formed in 2001 to help strengthen relations and coordination amongst different Muslim groups. In 2005 COMOG held a National conference on public concerns regarding the handling of the Hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage. COMOG held two conferences during the reporting period on Muslim leadership and later held press events in connection with the Danish cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed.

Improved relations between religious groups were also aided by the creation of the Ghana Congress of Religions and Peace (GCRP) in July 2005. Modeled after the World Congress of Religion and Peace, it is composed of Christian and Muslim leaders and aims to foster tolerance between these two religious groups. As part of its activities, the GCRP lobbied government on issues of religious freedom, family planning and anti-abortion laws, and campaigned for compassion for those afflicted with HIV/AIDS. As evidenced by the President's attendance of GCRP's inauguration ceremony, the GCRP is recognized by the Ghanaian government and enjoyed good relations with the Government during the reporting period.

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.

Embassy officers continued to meet regularly with government and NGO contacts. In addition to mediating the case of SDA students at the University of Ghana, embassy officials worked with these contacts to promote and monitor religious freedom throughout the country. In June 2006, for example, an embassy official visited a "witch camp" in Gambaga in Northern Ghana as part of a religious freedom outreach effort.

Outreach to the Muslim community, which suffers from poor economic and social conditions for reasons independent of their religion, has been a focal point of the U.S. embassy's activities since 2002.

In late 2005, the embassy organized several iftar programs throughout the country, including dinners and food donations, in which embassy officials spoke about the importance of religious tolerance and encouraged collaboration between religious groups both within and across different denominations. Under this framework, the ambassador hosted a large iftar at her residence to which representatives from all Muslim sects were invited. In a symbolic act of tolerance and acceptance, the Ambassador met with Muslim members of the mainstream Tijaniya group as well as with members of the Amadias, who are often shunned by Tijaniyas, during another iftar in Wa. In Tamale, a Catholic priest also spoke publicly about promoting good Muslim-Christian relations during another embassy-sponsored iftar.

Since 2002, outreach to the Muslim community, which suffers from poor economic and social conditions for reasons independent of their religious beliefs and practice, has been a focal point of the embassy's activities. Under this

framework, embassy officers attended Muslim functions and hosted several events with Muslims leaders in the Accra, Kumasi, and Tamale regions. These events served to promote interfaith dialogue and raise awareness of potential programming opportunities with the United States that would benefit Muslims in their communities. Among the programs discussed and implemented was the International Visitors program--a U.S State Department initiative which sponsored the travel of several Muslims to the United States. Through the program, participants were exposed to forms of promoting religious tolerance within diverse communities. Under its Democracy and Governance program, USAID also worked in collaboration with the embassy, Muslim leaders, and communities in Kumasi to improve their capacity to work effectively with local government officials on key development issues affecting local Muslim populations.

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