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USDOS – US Department of State

2020 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. On March 15, the government restricted public gatherings, including for in-person worship, as a measure to combat COVID-19. While most Christian and Muslim leaders advised their communities to follow the directive, a minority, primarily composed of small, independent churches, complained that the ban on large gatherings infringed upon religious liberties, and some defied the decrees by gathering for worship. President Nana Akufo-Addo lifted the ban on July 31. The President moved forward with plans for an interdenominational national Christian cathedral, but opposition to the proposal for the new cathedral continued.

Muslim and Christian leaders continued to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and tolerance and reported communication and coordination among themselves on a wide array of matters. Religious institutions played a key role in providing vulnerable citizens a social safety net, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Religious leaders generally praised the government for consulting with religious institutions on those measures.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed with government officials the importance of mutual understanding, religious tolerance, and respect for all religious groups. Embassy officers discussed religious freedom and tolerance with religious leaders, including engagement with the National Peace Council and Regional Peace Councils, whose governing councils include prominent religious leaders. In April, the Ambassador published a Ramadan message recognizing interfaith engagement, cooperation, and partnership.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 29.3 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2010 government census (the most recent available), approximately 71 percent of the population is Christian, 18 percent is 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, Eastern Orthodox, African independent churches, the Society of Friends, and numerous nondenominational Christian groups, including charismatic churches.

Muslim communities include Sunnis, Ahmadiyya, Shia, and Sufis (Tijaniyyah 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. 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 taxes, on a pay-as-earned basis, on for-profit business activities, such as church-run private schools and universities.

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 Christianity and Islam. There is also an Islamic education unit within the Ministry of Education 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. Faith-based schools that accept funds from the government are obliged to comply with the directive that states students’ religious practices must be respected.

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

Government Practices

While most Christian and Muslim leaders advised their communities to follow a March 15 government directive restricting public gatherings to combat COVID-19, a minority, primarily composed of small independent churches, complained that the ban on large gatherings infringed upon religious liberties, and some contravened the decrees by gathering for worship. President Akufo-Addo lifted the ban on July 31, although restrictions on capacity and length of worship remained in place. President Akufo-Addo declared March 25 a National Day of Prayer and Fasting for protection for the country and the world from COVID-19.

Despite vigorous debate among religious groups and lawmakers about the utility of legislation to manage the activities of “self-styled” pastors, no consensus had developed and no legislation was drafted. In 2019, the Christian Council of Ghana, an umbrella group of mainly Protestant denominations, disagreed with calls by some legislators for a law to control the activities of “self-styled” pastors, saying the situation was “complex” and calling instead for self-regulation, such as established ecumenical bodies’ sharing best practices with churches.

There were reports of uneven enforcement and implementation in schools across the country of the government directive requiring schools to respect students’ religious 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. The Islamic Education Unit of the Ghana Education Service received a complaint that a private school in Accra asked a student to remove her hijab. Similarly, there were continued reports that some publicly funded Islamic mission schools required female Christian students to wear the hijab.

Both support for and opposition to the President’s proposal to build an interdenominational national Christian cathedral continued. Although President Akufo-Addo stated that public funds would not be used for the project, critics questioned whether the \$100 million cathedral should be a priority for a country with urgent development needs and argued that the project inappropriately linked the state with a particular faith. In March, President Akufo-Addo attended a ceremony marking the beginning of construction of the national cathedral; construction was delayed until October due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Government officials leading meetings, receptions, and state funerals generally offered Christian and Islamic prayers and, occasionally, traditional invocations. President Akufo-Addo, a Christian, and Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia, a Muslim, continued to emphasize the importance of peaceful religious coexistence in public remarks. While receiving an international religious leader in February, Akufo-Addo commented, “We are a country where even though the overwhelming majority are Christian, we have a significant Muslim population, and there are still a few who are committed to the old gods. They make up the population and we live here in harmony and in tolerance of each other. It is one of the distinctive features of this country and it is one we want to preserve.” On New Year’s Eve, Bawumia celebrated with a Christian congregation, stating, “We have a country in which the Chief Imam, belonging to the Islamic Faith, celebrates his birthday in a church. And today, like in many instances, we have the Vice President who is a Muslim worshipping with Christians to mark the end of the year... These are a few of the many instances of such religious tolerance and coexistence we enjoy in Ghana.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslim and Christian leaders continued informal dialogue between their respective governing bodies and the National Peace Council. Faith leaders said they regularly communicated among themselves on religious matters and ways to address issues of concern or sensitivity. Religious institutions played a key role in providing vulnerable citizens a social safety net during the COVID-19 pandemic, and religious leaders generally praised the government for consulting with religious institutions on the measures. For example, the Ghana Catholic Bishops Conference in March appealed to Catholic organizations, businesses, and worshipers to donate supplies to medical professionals and to provide food and shelter to those affected by COVID-19-related restrictions.

There were numerous reports of religious figures making controversial prophecies. Some religious leaders predicted the outcome of the country's national elections, which took place in December, straining political tensions ahead of polling.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives discussed with government officials the importance of mutual understanding, religious tolerance, and respect for all religious groups. Embassy officials also discussed these subjects with a broad range of religious groups and civil society organizations, including Christian groups such as the Christian Council and the Ghana Catholic Bishops Conference, as well as Muslim civil society organizations such as the Office of the National Chief Imam. They also engaged with the National Peace Council and Regional Peace Councils, whose governing councils include prominent religious leaders. In addition, the Ambassador underscored in meetings with key religious leaders that the United States supported an individual's right to his or her faith as well as the right of individuals not to practice any religion. In April, the Ambassador published a Ramadan message recognizing interfaith engagement, cooperation, and partnership.

The embassy continued its support for the efforts of the West Africa Center for Counter Extremism, a local organization that brought together traditional leaders, interfaith religious leaders, political party leaders, and local government authorities to emphasize messages of peace, tolerance, and nonviolence to vulnerable youth.

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