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U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Ghana

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 238,538 square miles and a population of 22 million. According to the 2000 government census, approximately 69 percent of the population is Christian, 16 percent is Muslim, and 15 percent adheres to traditional indigenous religious beliefs or other religious groups. The Muslim community has disputed these figures, asserting that the Muslim population is closer to 30 percent. Pentecostal and charismatic churches are reported to be the fastest growing Christian denominations. Approximately 6 percent of the population does not affiliate itself with a particular religion. A significant number of Christians and Muslims also hold traditional indigenous religious beliefs.

Christian groups include Roman Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, Mennonite, Evangelical Presbyterian, Presbyterian, African Methodist Episcopal Zionist, Christian Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, F'eden, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventist, Pentecostals, Baptist, African independent churches, the Society of Friends (Quakers), and numerous charismatic religious groups.

Four Islamic traditions are present in the country: Tijanis, orthodox Sunnis, Ahmadis, and a small number of Shi'a.

Traditional indigenous religious groups include Afrikania Mission, also known as the Afrikan Renaissance Mission. Other religious groups include the Baha'i, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, Shintoist, Ninchiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai, Sri Sathya Sai Baba Sera, Sat Sang, Eckankar, Trokosi, the Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna, and Rastafarian. Zetahil, a practice unique to the country, combines elements of Christianity and Islam.

There is not a significant link between ethnicity and religion; however, geography is often associated with religious identity. The majority of the Muslim population resides 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 religious beliefs reside in rural areas. Christians live throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

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

There is no government body that regulates or oversees religious affairs as all religious bodies are independent institutions; however, religious institutions must register with the Registrar General's Department to receive formal government recognition. The registration requirement for religious bodies at the Office of the Registrar General is the same for a nongovernment organization (NGO). There were no reports that the Government denied registration to any

group. Most traditional indigenous religious groups, with the exception of the Afrikania Mission, did not register.

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

During an overhaul of the public education system in March 2008, the Ministry of Education removed Religious and Moral Education from the curriculum, prompting a wave of protests in the media from many religious leaders. In response, the President directed the Ministry of Education to reinstate the subject in the curriculum. Afrikania Mission subsequently described the President's directive to reinstate the subject as imposing foreign cultures on students.

The Government often took steps to promote interfaith understanding. At government meetings and receptions, there was usually a multid denominational invocation led by leaders from various religious groups. Throughout the reporting period, the President and Vice-President made public remarks about the importance of peaceful religious co-existence.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

On March 16, 2008, a Muslim student fell to his death from a school building while trying to escape his teacher, who was allegedly forcing the student and a group of his friends to attend a Christian service. A member of the Coalition of Muslim Organizations later confirmed that the death was an unfortunate combination of truancy and bad judgment rather than religious discrimination.

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

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Traditional village authorities and families continued to banish rural women for suspected witchcraft, particularly in the Northern, Upper East, and Upper West regions. However, accusations of witchcraft were unrelated to the religious affiliations, beliefs, or practices of the accused women.

Public discussion continued over religious worship versus traditional indigenous practices and respect for the rights and customs of others in a diverse society. Some religious leaders actively advocated tolerance towards other religious groups and discouraged religiously motivated violence, discrimination, and harassment; others, particularly lay persons associated with evangelical groups, continued to preach intolerance for other groups such as Muslims and traditional indigenous religious groups.

Some Muslims continued to feel a sense of political and social exclusion as Christianity influenced many aspects of society. Muslims cited token representation of Muslims in national leadership positions, the deferral to only Christian-oriented prayers in public settings, and the ubiquity of Christian slogans as contributing to this perception of marginalization and discrimination within the Muslim community. The current President is Christian and the Vice-President is Muslim.

The Afrikania Mission continued to criticize the Government, foreign diplomatic missions, and NGOs, contending that they corrupt traditional values and impose foreign religious beliefs. Afrikania Mission and other supporters of traditional African religious groups continued to accuse human rights NGOs of misrepresenting Trokosi beliefs in the southern Volta region, and regarded government and NGO campaigns against Trokosi as religious persecution. Government agencies, such as the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice, maintained a ban on ritual servitude and campaigned against the Trokosi practice of pledging youth (commonly female teenagers) to extended service at shrines.

Human rights activists continued to express concern about Pentecostal prayer camps in which individuals believed to be possessed by evil spirits were chained up for weeks, physically assaulted, and denied food and water. The camps targeted in particular persons with mental illness. Reports indicated that these practices extended to the Greater

Accra, Eastern, Central, Western, Ashanti, Volta, and Brong Ahafo regions. Members of the psychiatric community continued to advocate for an updated mental health law to better protect the rights of the mentally ill.

Some newspapers occasionally printed anti-Mormon sentiments.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy officials worked with contacts to promote and monitor religious freedom.

Embassy officers attended Islamic functions and hosted several events with Muslim leaders in the Accra, Kumasi, and Tamale regions, promoting interfaith dialogue and raising awareness of potential programming opportunities.

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