

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ghana

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for individuals' freedom to profess and practice any religion.

As of year's end, there had been no further movement on a proposed regulatory framework that would clarify individual religious rights and the responsibilities of publicly financed institutions, particularly regarding elementary and secondary schools. There were no public reports of schools impinging on students' rights to observe Ramadan in 2023. Opposition to President Nana Akufo-Addo's proposal to build an interdenominational national Christian cathedral continued, with critics questioning whether the cathedral, with costs estimated at \$400 million, should be a priority for a country with urgent development needs.

Muslim and Christian leaders said they regularly communicated among themselves on religious matters and on ways to address issues of mutual concern or sensitivity. There were continued Muslim-Christian and intra-Muslim tensions in the country, with the latter being found largely in northern areas. Researchers described the main cause of intra-Muslim tensions as doctrinal differences. They also noted that disputes between farmers and herders and an influx of asylum-seekers and other migrants from Burkina Faso heightened tensions. The West Africa Center for Counter Extremism organized community workshops and forums aimed at improving inter- and intra-religious (Muslim) relations in the Upper East, Upper West, and Northern Regions.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed **the importance of** mutual understanding, religious tolerance, and respect for all religious groups with government officials and religious leaders, **including engagement with the interfaith National Peace Council and regional peace councils.** The embassy commemorated Muslim and Christian holidays through social media posts, including in local languages. Embassy officials also engaged Muslim organizations and educators on the need to advance religious freedom and prevent violent extremism related to religion. In June, embassy representatives visited the National Chief Imam to make an Eid al-Adha food donation. The Ambassador and other embassy officials also routinely met with Christian religious leaders, including from the charismatic Christian, Protestant, and Catholic communities.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 33.8 million (midyear 2023). According to the latest government census in 2021, approximately 71 percent of the population is Christian, 20 percent Muslim, 3 percent adhere to indigenous or animistic religious beliefs, and 6 percent belong to other religious groups or profess no religious beliefs. Smaller religious groups include Baha'is, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, and followers of Shintoism, Eckankar, and Rastafarianism.

According to census data, Christian denominations include Pentecostals/Charismatics (44 percent of Christians), other Protestants (24 percent), Roman Catholics (14 percent), and others (18 percent). Protestant denominations include African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Anglican, Baptist, Evangelical Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Seventh-day Adventist. Other Christian denominations include African Faith Tabernacle Church, Church of Christ, The Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church Universal and Triumphant, Jehovah's Witnesses, Kristo Asafo, Musama Disco Christo Church, Twelve Apostles Church, Mennonite, Eastern Orthodox, African independent churches, the Society of Friends, and numerous nondenominational Christian groups.

Muslim communities include Sunnis, Ahmadiyya, Shias, and Sufis (Tijaniyyah and Qadiriyya orders).

Many individuals who identify as Christian or Muslim also practice some aspects of indigenous beliefs. There are other 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; a majority of Muslims reside in the urban centers of Accra, Kumasi, and Sekondi-Takoradi and in the northern regions. 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.

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 cost for religious groups is slightly lower than the fee for nongovernmental organizations. To register, groups must fill out a form and pay a fee of 270 cedis (\$23). 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-operated 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 Muslims. The ministry permits private religious schools, but these must follow the prescribed curriculum set by the ministry. International schools, including 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 High Court reaffirmed this principle in 2021 when it decided in favor of two Rastafarian students who sued the government when their school required them to cut their dreadlocks.

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

Government Practices

As of year's end, the government had made no further movement towards adopting a proposed regulatory framework that would clarify individual religious rights and the responsibilities of

publicly financed institutions, particularly elementary and secondary schools. The proposed framework had been under development since 2021, following reports of schools impinging on the religious rights of students, including the Wesley Girls' School barring Muslim students from fasting during Ramadan. The framework would explicitly codify the rights of students to engage in religious practice, delineating the responsibilities of the government, school administration, teachers, and students, but progress slowed after some Christian communities raised concerns regarding the government's role in regulating religious practice. There were no reports of schools impinging on students' rights to observe Ramadan in 2023.

The issue of regulating self-styled "pastors" working outside of established ecumenical bodies continued to be debated between legislators and the Christian Council of Ghana, an umbrella group of mainly traditional Protestant denominations. The established religious bodies stated they recognized the concerns that the legislators expressed about the individuals – including allegations of sexual misconduct, false prophecies that caused fear and panic, and financial exploitation of church members – but opposed legislation that would regulate religious practice. The Ghana Charismatic Bishops' Conference, representing more than 4,000 charismatic churches, reiterated its opposition to any form of legislative or governmental framework.

Opposition to President Nana Akufo-Addo's proposal to build an interdenominational national Christian cathedral continued. In August, Parliament established an ad hoc special investigative committee to examine the procurement processes for the acquisition and preparation of the site. The President previously stated that public funds would not be used for the project, saying only that the project would be constructed on state-owned lands. Cathedral construction remained paused since August 2022. Critics continued to question whether the cathedral complex, where the estimated cost has ballooned from \$100 million to \$400 million, should be a priority for a country with urgent development needs and argued that the project inappropriately linked the state with a particular faith.

Government officials leading official events 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. National Democratic Congress presidential nominee, former President John Mahama, also publicly underscored the importance of Ghana's traditions of interfaith tolerance.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom ✓

According to Muslim leaders, Muslim-Christian and intra-Muslim tensions continued in the country, with the latter being found largely in northern areas. Researchers described the main cause of intra-Muslim tensions as doctrinal differences, with different groups interpreting the Quran and hadith (sayings or customs of Muhammad and his companions) differently. According to sources, chieftaincy, land tenure, and politics played important roles in exacerbating intra-Muslim tensions between the two major chieftaincies in the Dagbon region. They also noted that disputes between farmers and herders and an influx of asylum-seekers and other migrants from Burkina Faso heightened tensions.

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 on ways to address issues of mutual concern or sensitivity. Leaders regularly gave token gifts or donations to other religious groups' major projects and publicized informal courtesy calls as a means of emphasizing tolerance and peace.

During the year, the West Africa Center for Counter Extremism, a regional organization that brings together traditional leaders, interfaith religious leaders, political party leaders, and local government

authorities to emphasize messages of peace, tolerance, and nonviolence to vulnerable youth, organized community workshops and forums aimed at improving inter- and intra- religious (Muslim) relations in the Upper East, Upper West, and Northern Regions as well as capacity-building workshops in Accra that focused on preventing violent extremism related to religion and promoting leadership, security, stability, and good governance.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement ✓

U.S. embassy representatives discussed **with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration, the Minister of Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs, officials from the Ministry of Education, and other government officials the importance of** mutual understanding, religious tolerance, and respect for all religious groups. Discussions with regional ministers and other government officials emphasized the centrality of religious tolerance to peace and stability, particularly in the northern regions.

Embassy officials also met 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, and prominent charismatic churches as well as Muslim civil society organizations, and directly with the National Chief Imam. They also **engaged with the National Peace Council and regional peace councils, whose governing councils included prominent religious leaders.** In addition, the Ambassador underscored in meetings with key religious groups, including the Office of the National Chief Imam and the Christian Council of Ghana, that the United States supports an individual's right to their faith as well as the right of individuals not to practice any religion.

In April, the Ambassador hosted an Iftar, and the embassy encouraged religious freedom and interfaith harmony in a social media post marking Eid al-Fitr. The embassy also commemorated Christian holidays through social media posts, including in local languages. Embassy officers discussed religious freedom and tolerance with religious leaders from various houses of worship and engaged them on the need to maintain broadmindedness. Embassy officials engaged Muslim organizations and educators on the need to advance religious freedom and prevent violent extremism related to religion. In June, embassy representatives visited the National Chief Imam to make an Eid al-Adha food donation. The Ambassador and other embassy officials also routinely met with Christian religious leaders, including from the charismatic Christian, Protestant, and Catholic communities.

The embassy maintained its support for the efforts of the West Africa Center for Counter Extremism by organizing high-level roundtables with U.S. cabinet-level officials.