

# GHANA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, stipulates 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. Debate among religious groups and lawmakers about how best to regulate religious practices continued during the year; the government and interfaith leaders continued work on a proposed regulatory framework that would ensure religious rights and deconflict policies, particularly those regarding elementary and secondary education. There were reports of uneven enforcement and implementation in schools across the country of a government directive requiring schools to respect students' religious practices. This was illustrated by the widely publicized case of Wesley Girls' School, which was ordered by the government to permit Muslim students to fast during Ramadan. President Nana Akufo-Addo moved forward with plans for an interdenominational national Christian cathedral, and government officials solicited public support for the project, while opposition to the proposal continued. The government continued to issue and revise directives for COVID-19 protocols for public events, including religious gatherings, which could not exceed two hours and had to be held in open spaces. Religious leaders generally expressed appreciation that the government consulted with religious institutions on those measures, and most Christian and Muslim leaders advised their communities to follow the directives. Some small, independent churches, however, continued to complain that the ban on large gatherings and the time limits on church and mosque religious activities infringed upon religious liberties.

According to nongovernmental organization (NGO) International Christian Concern, three members of a prayer ministry in Kumasi were wounded when armed assailants attacked their all-night prayer service on February 6. 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.

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 included prominent religious leaders. In May,

the Ambassador encouraged religious freedom and interfaith harmony in a social media post marking Eid al-Fitr. In July, the Ambassador made Eid al-Adha donations to the National Chief Imam.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 32.4 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2010 government census (the most recent available with this data), 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 Baha'is, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, and followers of 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, provides for individuals' freedom to profess and practice any religion, and does not designate a state 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 of 270 Ghana cedis (\$45). 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 Muslim communities. 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 country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

Debate among religious groups and lawmakers regarding how best to regulate religious practices continued during the year. As of December, key stakeholders, including the Ghana Education Service, the Christian Council of Ghana, the Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council, Muslim leaders and the Office of the Chief Imam, the Catholic Bishops Conference, as well as leaders of smaller faith communities and traditional religious authorities, continued to work on a proposed regulatory framework that would ensure religious rights and deconflict policies, particularly policies that regard elementary and secondary education. The issue of

regulating “self-styled” pastors, those 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.

There were reports of uneven enforcement and implementation in schools across the country of the government directive requiring schools to respect students’ religious practices. In March, Achimota School admitted two Rastafarian students on the condition they shave their dreadlocks. The students challenged the directive and the Human Rights High Court ruled in their favor, but the decision was appealed by the school, with a final decision pending at year’s end.

During Ramadan, Wesley Girls’ School and other schools barred Muslim students from fasting. Wesley Girls’ School said it was preventing doing so for health reasons. The issue divided segments of the Christian and Muslim population. It was widely covered in traditional and social media and discussed in parliament. On May 1, the Ghana Education Service, the division of the Ministry of Education responsible for ensuring that all school-age children are provided with quality formal education, ordered all schools to permit Muslim students to fast during Ramadan, a decision hailed as a victory for religious tolerance. President Akufo-Addo made a public show to break the Ramadan fast on Eid al-Fitr with members of the Muslim community served by the school during the debate.

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, to be constructed on state-owned lands, critics continued to question whether the \$100 million cathedral complex 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 September, President Akufo Addo traveled to Texas to attend a fundraising event for the cathedral, following his attendance at the UN General Assembly meeting in New York. At a midyear budget review presentation to Parliament, Minister of Finance Ken Ofori-Atta urged each citizen to contribute 100 Ghana cedis (\$17) per month voluntarily towards the construction of the National Christian Cathedral.

The government continued to issue and revise directives for COVID-19 protocols affecting public events. As of year’s end, all public gatherings, including worship activities, could not exceed two hours and were required to be held in open spaces. Religious leaders generally expressed appreciation that the government consulted with religious institutions on COVID-19 protection measures. While most

Christian and Muslim leaders advised their communities to follow the directive, some small, independent churches continued to complain that the ban on large gatherings and the two-hour time limit on church and mosque religious activities infringed upon religious liberties.

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.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

According to NGO International Christian Concern, a U.S.-based Christian advocacy organization, three members of the Action Prayer Ministry in Kumasi were wounded when armed assailants attacked their all-night prayer service on February 6. According to police and congregation members, gunmen fired into the congregation at 2:00 am, slightly injuring three individuals. Police responded and found church members restraining one of the attackers. The perpetrators were later found to be members of armed gangs who sought to extort money from church members.

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.

There were 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, with different groups interpreting the Quran and hadith differently. They stated the Ahlus-Sunnah wal Jamaa viewed the Tijaniyya as heretics and innovators, while the latter viewed the former as ignorant and resistant to change. According to sources, chieftaincy, land tenure, and politics played an important role in exacerbating intra-Muslim tensions between the two major chieftaincies in the Dagbon region.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy representatives discussed with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration and other 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 included 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 May, the Ambassador encouraged religious freedom and interfaith harmony in a social media post marking Eid al-Fitr. Embassy officers discussed religious freedom and tolerance with religious leaders and engaged them on the need to maintain broadmindedness. The embassy supported the Islamic Education Unit of the national education service by donating iftar food packages to Muslim families in selected impoverished communities of Accra, while engaging Muslim organizations and educators on the need to advance religious freedom and prevent violent extremism related to religion.

In July, the Ambassador made an Eid al-Adha food donation to the National Chief Imam. During their meeting, the Ambassador underscored the importance of avoiding religious extremism.

The embassy continued its support for the efforts of the West Africa Centre for Counter Extremism, a local 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. During the year, the center organized community workshops and forums aimed at improving inter- and intrareligious (Muslim) relations in the Upper East, Upper West, and Northern Regions, as well as capacity building workshops in Accra focusing on preventing violent extremism and promoting leadership, security, stability, and good governance.