

Ghana (23)

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U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Ghana

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there were some limits on this right.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. In the past, the Government did not always prosecute those responsible for religious violence; however, the Government increased its prosecution of violent acts, including religious violence, and all incidents of religious violence were prosecuted during the period covered by this report.

Tension persists between a segment of the Christian community and traditional authorities over the annual ban on drumming in the ethnic Ga traditional area; however, unlike in previous years, there were no incidents of violence during the 2002 ban on drumming. The country's legal code prohibits ritual or customary servitude; however, Trokosi, a form of religious indoctrination and forced servitude, exists on a limited scale in the Volta Region.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total land area of approximately 92,000 square miles, and its population is 19.5 million. According to the 2000 government census, approximately 69 percent of the country's population is Christian, 16 percent is Muslim, and 9 percent adheres to traditional indigenous religions or other religions. The Muslim community has protested these figures, asserting that the Muslim population is closer to 30 percent. Other religions include the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Nichiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai, Sri Sathya Sai Baba Sera, Sat Sang, Eckanker, the Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna, Rastafarianism, and other international faiths, as well as some separatist or spiritual churches or cults, which include elements of Christianity and traditional beliefs such as magic and divination. Zetahil, a practice unique to the country, combines elements of Christianity and Islam. There are no statistics available for the percentage of atheists in the country. Atheism does not have a strong presence, as most persons have some spiritual and traditional beliefs.

Christian denominations 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, Pentecostal, Baptist, and the Society of Friends. Christianity often includes an overlay of traditional beliefs. No figure of the number of persons who attend services was available.

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 a characteristic of traditional indigenous religions because ancestors also provide a link between the supreme being and the living and at times may be reincarnated. The religious leaders of those sharing these diverse beliefs commonly are referred to as priests and are trained in the arts of healing and divination. These priests typically operate shrines to the supreme deity or to one of the lesser gods, relying upon the donations of the public to maintain the shrine and for their own maintenance. One known group, Afrikania, also known as the Afrikan Renaissance Mission (ARM), actively supports traditional religious practices. Afrikania often criticizes the Government, foreign diplomatic missions, and nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) for corrupting traditional values and imposing foreign religious beliefs. Afrikania leaders claim the movement has more than 4 million followers; however, no independent confirmation of the claim was available.

Three principal branches of Islam are represented in the country: the orthodox Ahlussuna, the Tijanis, and the Ahmadis. A small number of Shi'a also are present.

The majority of the Muslim population is concentrated in the urban centers of Accra, Kumasi, Sekondi-Takoradi, Tamale, and Wa, and in northern areas of the country. The majority of the followers of more traditional religions mainly reside in the rural areas of the country. Christians live throughout the country.

Religions considered to be "foreign" include the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Ninchiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai, Sri Sathya Sai Baba Sera, Sat Sang, Eckankar, the Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna, and Rastafarianism.

Foreign missionary groups operate freely in the country, including Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Seventh-Day Adventist, Muslim, and Mormon groups.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there were some limits on this right.

Religious institutions that wish to have formal government recognition are required to register with the Registrar General's Department. This is a formality only, and there were no reports that the Government denied registration to any group. Most traditional religions, with the exception of the Afrikania Mission, do not register. Formally recognized religions are exempt from paying taxes on ecclesiastical, charitable, and educational activities that do not generate income from trade or business; however, religious organizations are required to pay taxes on business activities that generate income.

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 wishes of the person taking the oath.

Foreign missionary groups operated in the country with a minimum of formal requirements and without restrictions.

The Government often takes steps to promote interfaith understanding. At government meetings and receptions, there generally is a multidenominational invocation usually led by religious leaders from various faiths. In 2001 Parliament formed a joint committee to address problems surrounding the annual ban on drumming in the Ga traditional area prior to the Homowo Festival (see Section III).

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In the past, the Government did not always prosecute those responsible for religious violence; however, the Government increased its prosecution of violent acts, including religious violence, and all incidents of religious violence were prosecuted during the period covered by this report.

In previous years, the Catholic Church in the archdiocese of Accra officially suspended a priest for conducting unorthodox "healing" services; however, there were no such incidents during the period covered by this report.

The Government requires that all students in public schools up to the equivalent of senior secondary school level attend a daily "assembly" or devotional service; however, in practice this regulation is not enforced always. The service is Christian and includes the recital of The Lord's Prayer, a Bible reading, and a blessing. Students at the senior secondary school level are required to attend a similar assembly three times a week. Students attending government-administered boarding school are required to attend a nondenominational service on Sundays.

In September 2000, officials from the Ministry of Education met with the Ghana Muslim Students' Association (GMSA) to discuss a petition concerning acts of discrimination against Muslims in some institutional organizations. Following the meeting, the Director General of the Ghana Education Service announced new regulations for all public educational institutions, including the stipulation that school authorities should not force students of minority religious groups to worship with the majority religious groups in school. In October 2000, the Minister directed all schools to respect the religious rights of all students; however, the Minister still received isolated reports of disrespect for the directive in some public schools. Afrikania also publicly has urged the Government to stop requiring Christian "indoctrination" of children in all government-funded schools.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In 2000 a government medical team, assisted by the police, forcibly immunized approximately 40 children from the First Century Gospel Church (Faith) in Jamestown, Accra, against poliomyelitis. When church members resisted the team's attempts to conduct the immunizations, police arrested seven persons, including the church's pastor. Church doctrine does not allow the administration of modern medicine to its members, and according to local reports, health teams had been prevented from immunizing the children for several years. Reports indicated that the local community supported the immunizations as being in the greater national interest. There were no reports of forced immunizations during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

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 Attitudes

There are generally amicable relations between the various religious communities, and spokesmen for these communities often advocate tolerance toward different religions; however, there was some tension among some religious groups. Public debate continued over religious worship versus traditional practices and respect for the rights and customs of others in a diverse society.

During the period covered by this report, there was continued tension between practitioners of the ethnic Ga tradition (the Ga are the original inhabitants of Accra, and some consider the Ga tradition to be a religion) and members of some charismatic churches over the annual ban by Ga traditional leaders on drumming and noise-making prior to the Ga Homowo (harvest) festival. Traditionalists maintain that their time-honored beliefs should be accorded due respect, while some Christians resent the imposition of bans, which they believe infringes on their right to worship as they please. In April 2000, religious and traditional leaders agreed to modify the ban, requiring drumming to be subdued and confined to the churches. On May 7, 2001, the first day of the 2001 ban, the Ga Traditional Council (GTC) announced that the agreement it had reached with local churches in 2000 was not applicable for 2001 and that the ban would apply to all drumming and noise-making. Christian churches claimed that the ban was unconstitutional and that they would not observe it. Several incidents of violence were reported during the 2001 ban on drumming. On May 23, 2001, the Forum of Religious Bodies in Ghana issued a statement, which was signed by seven religious councils, calling for peaceful coexistence and further negotiation with the GTC; however, a GTC leader stated that no agreement had been reached with the churches, and that he did not endorse any compromise. Although no agreement was reached, there were no reports of violence during the final two Sundays of the 2001 ban.

Following the violence, the Government also made extensive efforts to mediate between charismatic Christians and ethnic Ga traditionalists. In June 2001, a parliamentary committee was established to examine the ban on drumming and noise-making. Based on recommendations made by the committee in their November 2001 report, the Ga traditionalists and the Forum of Religious Bodies agreed that during the period of the 2002 ban, drumming and noise-making by churches should not exceed the decibel level proscribed by existing law. A monitoring team comprised of police, an environmental protection agency, and city authorities was formed to ensure that existing laws on public nuisance were enforced throughout the year, and not only during the period of the ban. A public education campaign also was launched to urge charismatic churches to respect existing law. As a result of these efforts, there were no incidents of violence during the May and June 2002 ban on drumming.

There were occasional reports of interreligious and intrareligious incidents but no violent incidents based on religious affiliation. There were no reports of intra-Muslim violence during the period covered by this report; however, tensions continued between members of the Tijanniya and Ahlussuna groups throughout the country. There were no developments in the 2000 case of three Muslims who were injured at Effiduase (Eastern Region) in a clash between two Muslim sects over doctrinal differences.

Trokosi, also known as Fiashidi, is a religious practice involving a period of servitude lasting up to 3 years. It is found primarily among the ethnic Ewe group in the Volta Region. A virgin girl, sometimes under the age of 10, but often in her teens, is given by her family to work and be trained in traditional religion at a fetish shrine for a period lasting between several weeks and 3 years as a means of atonement for an allegedly heinous crime committed by a member of the girl's family. In exceptional cases, when a girl of suitable age or status is unavailable, a boy can be offered. The girl, who is known as a Trokosi or a Fiashidi, then becomes the property of the shrine god and the charge of the shrine priest for the duration of her stay. As a charge of the priest, the girl works in the shrine and undergoes instruction in the traditional indigenous religion. In the past, there were reports that the girls were the sexual property of the priests; however, while instances of abuse may occur on a case-by-case basis, there is no evidence that sexual or physical abuse is an ingrained or systematic part of the practice. Shrine priests generally are male, but may be female as well. The practice explicitly forbids a Trokosi or Fiashidi to engage in sexual activity or contact during her atonement period. During that time, she helps with the upkeep of the shrine, which may include working on the shrine's farm, drawing water, and performing other agricultural or household labor. Trokosi may or may not attend school.

During the atonement period, most Trokosi do not live in the shrines, which generally are little more than fenced-in huts with small courtyards; many remain with their families or stay with members of the shrine who live nearby. During the girl's stay, her family must provide for the girl's needs, including food and clothing; however, in some cases families are unable to do so. After she has completed her service to the shrine, the girl's family completes their obligation by providing items that may include drinks, cloth, money, and sometimes livestock, to the shrine for a final release ritual. After the release ritual, the girl returns to her family and resumes her life, without, in the vast majority of cases, any particular stigma attaching to her status as a former Trokosi shrine participant. In very occasional cases, the family abandons the girl or cannot afford the cost of the final rites, in which case she may remain at the shrine indefinitely. She also may leave the shrine and return to her village, with her family's association then

sundered with the shrine. Even when freed from the shrine, a Trokosi woman generally has few marketable skills and, depending on the customs of her village, may have difficulty getting married. Generally the women continue to associate themselves with the shrine, a voluntary association involving return visits for ceremonies. In many instances, when a Trokosi woman dies, even years or decades after she has completed her service and resumed her life in the village, her family is expected to replace her with another young girl, thus continuing the association of the family to the shrine from generation to generation.

Reports on the number of women and girls bound to various Trokosi shrines vary; however, shrines rarely have more than four girls serving their atonements at any one time. According to the local NGO International Needs, there were more than 2,000 women or girls in Trokosi shrines; however, according to credible reports from international observers, there were no more than 100 girls serving at Trokosi shrines throughout the Volta Region (see Section IV). In addition in February and March 2002, several letters to the editor were published in which other local NGO's disputed the claims of International Needs.

In 1998 Parliament passed, and the President signed, comprehensive legislation to protect women and children's rights that included a ban on ritual servitude, which many activists interpreted to include Trokosi. According to human rights groups, such as International Needs, that have been campaigning against Trokosi for years, the practice has decreased in recent years because other belief systems have gained followers, and fetish priests who die have not been replaced. Adherents of Trokosi describe it as a practice based on traditional African religious beliefs; however, the Government does not recognize it as a religion.

Belief in witchcraft remains strong in many parts of the country. Rural women may be banished by traditional village authorities or their families for suspected witchcraft. Most accused witches are older women, often widows, who are identified by fellow villagers as the cause of difficulties, such as illness, crop failure, or financial misfortune. Many of these banished women go to live in "witchcamps," villages in the north populated by suspected witches. The women do not face formal legal sanction if they return home; however, most fear that they may be beaten or lynched if they return to their villages. The law provides protection for alleged witches. In the past, human rights NGO's estimated that the number of occupants of the witches' camp was growing; however, there are no definitive statistics regarding the number of women living in northern witchcamps, and international and domestic observers estimate that there are fewer than 850 women in the camps. The Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) and human rights NGO's have mounted a campaign to end this traditional practice, but have met with little success. Various organizations provide food, medical care, and other forms of support to the residents of the camps.

In addition to banishment, suspected witches are subject to violence and lynching. For example, in April 2001, a man living in Tongor in the Volta Region chopped off the hands of his

75-year-old aunt, claiming that she was a witch. Police arrested the assailant, but there were no further developments in the case by the end of the period covered by this report.

In 2000 an 80-year-old woman in the Volta Region was brought before a community tribunal when a local teacher accused her of being a witch. In his statement to the tribunal, the teacher said his bank account was depleted, animals had been eating the produce on his farm, and he recently had become impotent, all of which he attributed to witchcraft on the part of the woman. The tribunal ruled that the woman must compensate the teacher with a portion of rum, a pot of palm wine, and \$6 (12,000 cedis). In 2001 the local press reported that the woman took the case to the CHRAJ and filed a suit in circuit court against the tribunal members and the teacher, claiming that the accusation of witchcraft and subsequent tribunal hearing subjected her to slander and public humiliation. There were no further developments in the case during the period covered by this report.

There were no developments in the January 2001 case in which members of the Christo Asafo Christian church clashed with members of the Boade Baaka traditional shrine at Taifa, greater Accra Region, after shrine members accused a Christian woman of witchcraft.

The clergy and other religious leaders actively discourage religiously motivated violence, discrimination, or harassment.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government monitors religious freedom in the country and discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. Embassy officers meet periodically with various leaders of religious and traditional communities in the country.

In September 2001, Embassy officers conducted a survey of Trokosi shrines, which included four separate trips to the Volta Region and nearly 2 weeks in the field, along with extensive interviews of government officials, foreign Embassy officers, religious leaders, shrine priests, NGO representatives, members of civil society, and Trokosis themselves. Embassy officials identified no more than 2 dozen active Trokosi shrines in the Volta Region, with a total of fewer than 100 girls serving their atonement periods (see Section III).

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