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Ghana

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, tensions sometimes occurred between different branches of the same faith, as well as between Christian and traditional faiths. A number of governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) promoted interfaith and intrafaith understanding.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total land area of approximately 238,538 square miles and its population is approximately 21 million. According to the 2000 government census, approximately 69 percent of the country's population is Christian, 15.6 percent is Muslim, and 15.4 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. To clarify the possible discrepancy, suggestions have been made by religious and government leaders to include religious identity on national citizenship cards, when a national citizen register is established. Other religions include the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Ninchiren 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 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 since 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, and rely 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 NGOs 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 dominant Islamic orientations are represented in the country: the Wahhabi-oriented 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 new or "foreign" to the country include the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Nichiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai, Sri Sathya Sai Baba Sera, Sat Sang, Eckankar, the Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna, and Rastafarianism.

Foreign missionaries 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. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

Religious institutions that wish to have formal government recognition are required to register with the Registrar General's Department. The registration requirement for religious bodies at the Office of the Registrar General is the same for any NGO. The organization pays \$.56 (approximately 5,000 cedis) for the application form, approximately \$4 for the registration form and approximately \$69 (approximately 610,000 cedis) for the registration. Applicants are required to renew their registration annually for approximately \$17. Registration 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 registered 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 individual.

The Government often takes steps to promote interfaith understanding. At government meetings and receptions, there generally is a multid denominational invocation usually led by religious leaders from various faiths. The Government recognizes Christian, Muslim, and secular holidays throughout the calendar year. Regional and local government authorities have successfully implemented recommendations of a 2001 Joint Parliamentary Committee to resolve problems in the Ga traditional area surrounding the annual ban on drumming prior to the Ga's 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. All incidents of religious violence were prosecuted during the period covered by this report.

Ministry of Education regulations state that public school authorities should not force students of minority religious groups to worship with the majority religious groups in school. The Minister of Education also directed all schools to respect the religious rights of all students. During the period covered by this report, Muslim organizations reported that while there were a few isolated reports of disrespect for the directive, Muslim students generally experienced greater religious freedom in public schools. In a few cases reported by the Director of the Islamic Education Unit in the Greater Accra Region, some school authorities even went beyond what is required to ensure the freedom of Muslim students to practice their religious beliefs. Students attending government-administered boarding schools are required to attend a nondenominational service on Sundays. Muslim students in these boarding schools are exempted from the service and are permitted to practice daily prayers.

In April 2003, the Federation of Muslim Students criticized the decision of authorities at the University of Ghana to halt the construction of a mosque in one of the campus residential halls, which would have provided a more centrally located place of worship for Muslim students. Currently, there are different Christian denominations that have designated places of worship within the university's five residence halls. Prior to the Federation's request for a similar institution to accommodate Muslim students, only one mosque—very remotely located from the main residence area—existed for this purpose. University officials initially approved the request for a centrally located mosque but then stopped construction on the grounds that the project did not fit into the university's architectural design. The Federation perceived this as an act of religious discrimination and voiced its concerns in April 2003. The controversy was resolved in March when university authorities designated several temporary spaces in residence halls where Muslim students

could practice their faith. The Federation and university authorities have agreed to the construction of a centrally located mosque but no action has been taken.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

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.

Unlike in the past, there were no reports of violence between practitioners of the ethnic Ga tradition and members of some charismatic churches over the Ga traditional leaders' annual ban on drumming and noise making prior to the Ga's Homowo (harvest) festival. The Gas are the original inhabitants of Accra, and some consider the Ga tradition to be a religion. Ga traditionalists maintain that their beliefs should be respected, while some Christians resent the imposition of bans, which they believe infringes on their right to worship.

Following several incidents of violence reported during the 2001 ban on drumming, the Government made extensive efforts to mediate between charismatic Christians and ethnic Ga traditionalists. A parliamentary committee examined the ban on drumming and noise-making and recommended that local government authorities establish a monitoring team to enforce existing by-laws regarding noise levels throughout the year and encourage dialogue between all parties. The Ga Traditional Council and the Forum of Religious Bodies agreed that during the ban, drumming and noise making by churches should not exceed the decibel level proscribed by existing law. Regional and city authorities formed a monitoring team comprised of police, the Environmental Protection Agency, and city and traditional authorities to ensure that existing noise regulations 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.

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. Muslim organizations are working to decrease intra-Muslim tensions through education and conflict resolution exercises.

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. 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. A Trokosi may or may not attend school. 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. In the past, there were reports that the priests subjected the girls to sexual abuse; 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.

During the atonement period, most Trokosis 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 a Trokosi has completed her service

to the shrine, the girl's family completes its 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. Alternatively, an abandoned or poor Trokosi may leave the shrine and return to her village, with her family's association then sundered with the shrine. Generally former Trokosi girls continue to associate themselves with the shrine into adulthood, making voluntary 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 credible reports from international observers, there were no more than 100 girls serving at Trokosi shrines throughout the Volta Region (see Section IV).

During the period covered by this report, reports by several NGOs indicated that the incidence of Trokosi was declining considerably.

Comprehensive legislation protects women's and children's rights and includes a ban on ritual servitude, which many activists interpreted to include Trokosi. According to human rights groups, 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.

During the period covered by this report, the Government continued to prosecute violence against suspected witches. In the past, human rights NGOs 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 government-funded Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) and human rights NGOs mounted a campaign to end the practice of banishing these women from their villages, but have met with little success. Various organizations provide food, medical care, and other forms of support to the residents of the camps.

There were no developments, nor were any likely, in the 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.

In July 2002, tensions between a local church and the traditional council led a mob to set fire to the church's worship center in Techiman, Brong-Ahafo Region. No injuries were reported. Traditional authorities have denied involvement in the fire. Those who follow traditional practices in the area have accused the church of preaching against the traditional Apoo Festival and ban on fishing on the Tano River. Traditional authorities ban fishing on certain days of the week and for festival periods during certain months. The reasons for the ban are partly superstitious and partly ecological since it is believed that the brief ban on fishing will replenish the community's fish stock. The ban is generally respected. This incident was an isolated case in which one church was accused of preaching against the widely accepted custom. The Techiman District Security investigated the incident in 2003. The District Security Committee advocated that local religious leaders refrain from making insubstantial claims and using intemperate language. Both sides of the conflict have agreed to respect each other's beliefs and no disturbances have arisen during the period covered by this report.

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

During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of anti-Semitic acts by the Government or citizens. There were occasional and isolated anti-Semitic sentiments expressed in a bi-weekly independent newspaper. The publication has an annual circulation of about 48,000 and generally supports opposition political party.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In view of the particular social and economic challenges faced by Muslim communities in the country, Muslim outreach has been a focal point of the U.S. Embassy since 2002. In the period covered by this report, the U.S. Embassy hosted several Muslims through the International Visitors Program. The Embassy sponsored Iftaar programs during Ramadan in 2003, to which both Muslim and Christian leaders were invited. Throughout 2003, the U.S. Embassy, Peace Corps, and U.S. Agency for International Development hosted several roundtable discussions with Muslim leaders in the Accra and Kumasi regions to raise awareness of potential long-term programming and short-term project opportunities to benefit Muslim communities. Representatives from the U.S. Embassy were present at a Religious Interfaith Cooperation Seminar in December 2003 and continue to meet with different religious NGOs and traditional leaders on a regular basis. During the April Earth Day Celebration, the Embassy, as part of its Muslim outreach effort, promoted the use of energy efficient stoves in an impoverished neighborhood in Accra that is predominantly Muslim.

U.S. Embassy officers meet regularly with government and NGO contacts to monitor issues related to religious freedom that have been problematic in the past, such as the Trokosi tradition in the Volta region, the ban on drumming, and incidents of interreligious and intrareligious conflict (see Section III).

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)

