

Ghana (23)

**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:****Ghana**

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, on at least one occasion local government officials restricted this right. The Government does not always prosecute those responsible for religious violence.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. In an effort to improve societal respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, the Government was more proactive in addressing the management of religious conflicts than in previous years.

The Government assisted in mediating interreligious disputes. While tension persists between the Christian community and traditional authorities over the annual ban on drumming in the ethnic Ga traditional area, both groups agreed to exercise restraint; there were no reports of violence during the spring 2000 annual ban. Despite laws banning the practice, a form of religious slavery at trokosi shrines exists on a limited scale. Government officials supported the forced polio vaccination of children in a local church. Police prevented worshipers from attending a church service conducted by a Catholic priest who was performing unorthodox "healing." Isolated incidents of violent conflict between different religious groups led to injuries and property damage. There were no reports of intra-Muslim clashes during the period covered by this report.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The U.S. Embassy has supported civil society efforts to address religious freedom issues.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion**Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. However, the Government does not always prosecute those responsible for religiously motivated attacks. For example, none of those who attacked churches during the 1999 annual ban on drumming (see Section II) were arrested or charged with an offense. Police authorities said that pursuing the cases only would exacerbate tensions. No suspects were charged in the firebombing of a Christian charismatic church in December 1996 and March 1998. The cases of those arrested following intra-Muslim clashes in Wenchi and Kumasi in 1998 are pending with the attorney general.

Religious institutions that wish formal recognition are required to register with the Registrar General's Department. This is a formality

only. Most traditional religions, with the exception of the Afrikania Mission, do not register. Formally recognized religions receive some tax relief. However, beyond a certain point the institutions are required to pay tax. In 1989 during the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) regime, which ruled the country from 1981 to 1992, a law requiring the registration of religious bodies was passed in an effort to regulate churches. The Ghana Council of Churches interpreted this law as contradicting the concept of religious freedom in the country. The PNDC repealed the law in 1992.

Religious Demography

About 40 percent of the country's estimated population of 18 million are at least nominally Christian. 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.

About 30 percent of the population adhere to traditional indigenous religions or other religions. These 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 man on earth. Veneration of ancestors also is a characteristic, as they too provide a link between the supreme being and the living and even may be reincarnated at times. 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.

About 25 percent of the population are Muslim. Three principal branches of Islam are represented in the country: the orthodox Sunnis and Tijanis, and the less orthodox Ahmadis. The Shi'a branch virtually is absent from the country's Islamic community.

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 or cults, which include elements of Christianity and traditional beliefs such as magic and divination. A new practice has emerged called "Zetahil," which combines elements of Christianity and Islam. Some consider the ethnic Ga tradition to be a religion (see Section II).

There are no statistics for the percentage of atheists. Atheism, as such, does not have a strong presence, as most persons have some spiritual and traditional beliefs.

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

Reportedly, only 1.9 million of those persons who profess the Christian

faith actually attend church. However, this figure appears to be lower than the actual number of persons who attend services.

Religions considered to be "foreign" include the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Ninchiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai, Sri Sathya Sai Baba Sera, Sat Sang, Eckanker, the Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna, and Rastafarianism. The Government neither monitors nor advises these organizations.

Foreign missionary groups, including Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Mormon groups, operated throughout the country with a minimum of formal requirements or restrictions.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

On February 20, 2000, the Ho district (Volta region) chief executive led a joint operation with police and health personnel to immunize the children at an Apostolic Faith of Kpalexose ("Well-Rooted Faith" in the Ewe language) church, a local church founded in 1931, against poliomyelitis. Church members consistently have refused immunizations on the grounds that their faith forbids the use of orthodox medicine. Police surrounded the church during worship services and health personnel administered the vaccine. It was reported that 155 children up to age 5 received the vaccine. The community reportedly supported the overriding of individual religious convictions as being in the greater national interest of eradicating polio.

The Catholic Church in the archdiocese of Accra officially suspended a priest for conducting unorthodox "healing" services. His superiors called his actions a failure to comply with his vows of obedience and a lack of responsibility and respect toward his superiors--especially the Bishop. When the accused priest was conducting one of these healing services, the gates to the cathedral were locked, and police personnel prevented worshipers from entering the church premises.

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 always enforced. This is a Christian service 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 boarding school are required to attend a nondenominational service on Sundays.

Government employees, including the President, are required to take an oath on taking office. However, this oath can be either religious or secular, depending on the wishes of the person taking the oath.

The Government took some steps to promote interfaith understanding. At government meetings and receptions there usually is a multid denominational invocation. Often religious leaders from various faiths are present.

Governmental Abuses of Religious Freedom

Although the Constitution prohibits slavery, religious slavery--trokosi--exists on a limited scale. In June 1998, Parliament passed and the President signed legislation to ban the practice of trokosi in

comprehensive legislation to protect women and children's rights. Human rights activists believe that the goal of eradicating the trokosi practice is attainable with the new law; however, the practice persists (see Section II).

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government was more proactive in addressing the management of religious conflicts. The Greater Accra Regional Coordinating Council conducted a workshop on managing religious conflicts in April 2000, several weeks before the annual ban on drumming (May 8 to June 8), which resulted in a workable compromise between religious and traditional leaders. The participants agreed that in 2000, drumming should be subdued and confined inside churches, in order for the traditionalists and Christians each to practice their beliefs unhindered and preclude a repeat of the spring 1999 violence. Also in April 2000, the National Commission for Civic Education held an interfaith forum to address religious conflict. Discussion centered on the idea that freedom of worship must be preserved, and religious groups therefore should respect each other's religious beliefs and practices. There were no reports of violence during spring 2000. In May 2000, the Upper West Regional Coordinating Council resolved a dispute between five Pentecostal churches and landowners in Jirapa (see Section II). During a Muslim celebration, a deputy minister of education appealed to citizens not to use religion and mode of dress to define citizenship.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

There generally are amicable relations between the various religious communities, and spokesmen for these communities often advocate tolerance toward different religions. 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 tension between practitioners of the ethnic Ga (the Ga are the original inhabitants of Accra) tradition (which some consider 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 believed that their time-honored beliefs should be accorded due respect, while some Christians resented the imposition of bans, which they believed infringed on their right to worship as they pleased.

Three incidents of violence were reported during the 1999 ban on drumming (see Section I). On May 15, May 29, and May 30, 1999, groups of men attacked churches that were not observing the drumming

ban. Some church equipment and money was stolen, and a church facility was vandalized. There were some minor injuries but no fatalities. There were no reports of violence during the May 8 to June 8, 2000 ban. One chieftancy dispute in the La district of the Ga traditional area was resolved through the intervention of President Rawlings, before violence erupted.

Although the Constitution prohibits slavery, religious slavery exists on a limited scale. Trokosi, a traditional practice found among the Ewe ethnic group and primarily in the Volta region, is an especially severe human rights abuse and a flagrant violation of women's and children's rights. It is a system in which a young girl, usually under the age of 10 years, is given by her family as a slave to a fetish shrine for offenses allegedly committed by a member of the girl's family. The belief is that, if someone in the family has committed a crime, such as stealing, members of the family may begin to die in large numbers unless a young girl is given to the local fetish shrine to atone for the offense. The girl becomes the property of the fetish priest, must work on the priest's farm, and perform other labors for him. Because they are the sexual property of the priests, most trokosi slaves have children by them. Although the girls' families must provide for their needs, such as food, most are unable to do so. There are an estimated 2,000 women and girls bound to various shrines in the trokosi system, a figure that does not include the slaves' children. Even when freed by her fetish priest from the more onerous aspects of her bondage, whether voluntarily or as a result of intervention by activists, a trokosi woman generally has few marketable skills and little hope of marriage and typically remains bound to the shrine for life by psychological and social pressure arising from a traditional belief that misfortune may befall a trokosi woman's family or village if she abandons her obligations to the shrine. When a fetish slave dies, her family is expected to replace her with another young girl, thus perpetuating the bondage to the fetish shrine from generation to generation.

In June 1998, Parliament passed and the President signed legislation to ban the practice of trokosi in comprehensive legislation to protect women and children's rights. Human rights activists believe that the goal of eradicating the trokosi practice is attainable with the new law. Nongovernmental organizations, such as International Needs, and government agencies, like the Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), have been campaigning against trokosi for several years and are familiar with the locations of the fetish shrines and the numbers of women and children enslaved. Activists know the community leaders and fetish priests and thus know with whom to negotiate. CHRAJ and International Needs have had some success in approaching village authorities and fetish priests at over 316 shrines, winning the release of nearly 1,000 trokosi slaves as of mid-2000 and retraining them for new professions. The followers of Trokosi claim this to be a religion, but the Government does not recognize it as such.

There have been 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.

In November 1999, in Agona Nyakrom, central region, a dispute during a soccer game between an Islamic middle school and a Methodist middle school led to arson and other destruction of property (corn mills, livestock, approximately 100 houses, and 3 mosques). A group of youths also attacked Muslims in the area, including the headmaster of

the Islamic school, who was beaten severely. Five persons suffered gunshot wounds. Police detained 30 men, including a chief. Newspapers reported that as a result of the conflict, large numbers of Muslims moved out of the area.

Members of the Christo Asafo Christian church clashed with members of the Boade Baaka traditional shrine on January 25, 2000, at Taifa, greater Accra region. The dispute arose days earlier after shrine members accused a Christian woman of witchcraft. In the process, the woman was injured slightly and a crowd formed. Christo Asafo members attacked the shrine in retaliation. There were some minor injuries. Police did not arrest or prosecute any of the participants, but continue to investigate the incident.

In March 2000, a dispute between five Pentecostal churches and landowners (tendaabas) created tension in Jirapa, Upper West region. After a member of the Kingdom of God ministries allegedly burned down a local shrine, the tendaabas banned religious activities of all churches except the Roman Catholic Church, until May 2000, when the regional coordinating council brokered a resolution (see Section I).

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

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy monitors religious freedom in the country and discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the overall context of the promotion of human rights.

Embassy officers meet with various leaders of religious communities in the country from time to time. The Embassy supported dialog between religious leaders and civil society. Embassy officers attended the opening ceremony of the greater Accra workshop on managing religious conflict (see Section I).

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