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Ghana

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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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 an 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 population is Christian, 15.6 percent is Muslim, and 15.4 percent adheres to traditional indigenous religions or other faiths. 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, Ninchiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai, Sri Sathya Sai Baba Sera, Sat Sang, Eckankar, the Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna, Rastafarianism, and other faiths, as well as some separatist or spiritual churches that 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.

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 (Quakers). Christianity often includes an overlay of traditional beliefs.

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 characteristic of traditional indigenous religions, because ancestors also provide a link between the Supreme Being and the living and at times may be reincarnated. Religious leaders of these traditional groups are commonly referred to as priests and are trained in the arts of healing and divination. The priests typically operate shrines to the Supreme Deity or to one of the lesser gods, and they rely upon the donations of the public to maintain the shrines and for their own maintenance. Afrikania, also known as the Afrikan Renaissance Mission, actively supports traditional religious practices. Afrikania often criticizes the Government, foreign diplomatic missions, and NGOs, contending that they corrupt traditional values and impose 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 traditions are represented in the country: Tijanis, the Wahhabi-oriented Ahlussuna, 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. The majority of the followers of traditional indigenous religions reside mainly in the rural areas of the country. Christians live throughout the country.

Foreign missionaries operate freely, 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 approximately \$0.56 (5,000 cedis) for the application form, approximately \$4 (35,000 cedis) for the registration form, and approximately \$69 (610,000 cedis) for the registration. Applicants are required to renew their registration annually for approximately \$17 (150,000 cedis). Registration is only a formality, 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 preference 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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Ministry of Education regulations state that public school authorities should not force students of minority faiths to worship with the majority religious groups in school. The Minister of Education also directed schools to respect the religious rights of all students. During the period covered by this report, Muslim organizations reported that while the directive was not respected in a few isolated cases, Muslim students generally experienced greater religious freedom in public schools than in past years. In a few cases reported by the Director of the Islamic Education Unit in the Greater Accra Region, some school authorities went beyond what is required to ensure the freedom of Muslim students to practice their religious beliefs by providing, for instance, areas for Muslim worship.

Many public schools and universities maintain Christian affiliations and practices that marginalize Muslim students as minorities. Christian missionaries founded the oldest and most prestigious public schools. These schools still derive financial support from their religious affiliation. They often require all Christian students to attend worship services and offer moral teachings based on Christian 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. Nonetheless, some Muslim students complain of insensitivity by some public school administrators who schedule examinations on Fridays, a day Muslims are expected to devote to their faith. Similarly, Muslim leaders and parents have expressed concerns about the difficulties Muslim students encounter during the Ramadan fast. Most school authorities reportedly fail to make special meal arrangements for fasting Muslim students, who prefer not to join their colleagues during normal meal hours. Some Muslim parents are concerned that their children must endure school environments that magnify religious differences to obtain the best public education available.

Muslim students at the University of Ghana continued to use temporary spaces in residence halls for prayers in addition to the central mosque.

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

Relations between the various religious communities are generally amicable and spokesmen for these communities often advocate tolerance toward different religions; however, there was 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. Because Christianity over the years has come to pervade many aspects of society, some Muslims feel a sense of political and social exclusion, due to factors such as the token representation of Muslims in national leadership positions, public prayers that often are Christian only, and the ubiquity of Christian slogans.

There were occasional reports of interreligious and intrareligious disputes but no violent incidents based on religious affiliation. Tensions continued between members of the Tijanniya and Ahlussuna groups throughout the country. Muslim organizations worked to decrease intra-Muslim tensions through education and conflict resolution exercises.

In December 2004, the Volta Regional Security Council (REGSEC) banned the 2004 annual convention of the Apostles Revelation Society at its international headquarters at New-Tadzewu in the Ketu District. REGSEC took this step to deter a possible outbreak of violence between factions within the group. After the natural death of its founder, the group was beset by a series of conflicts between factions, leading to court suits, threats, and skirmishes.

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. To atone for an allegedly heinous crime committed by a family member, another family member is sent to be trained in traditional religion at a fetish shrine for a period lasting between several weeks and 3 years. In many cases, a virgin girl, sometimes under the age of 10 but often in her teens, is offered as a means of atonement. In exceptional cases, when no girl is available, boys or adults may serve. The Trokosis or Fiashidis, as these persons are called, become the property of the shrine god and the charge of the shrine priest for the duration of their stay. As a charge of the priest, the Trokosi serves in the shrine and undergoes instruction in the traditional indigenous religion. The Trokosi helps with the upkeep of the shrine, such as sweeping and pouring libations. 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 the atonement period. In the past, there were reports that the priests subjected girls to sexual abuse; however, while individual instances of abuse may occur and many priests have eventually taken Trokosis as their wives, there is no evidence that sexual or physical abuse is a 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. When a minor girl serves as a Trokosi or Fiashidi, 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, her 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 stigma attaching to her status as a former Trokosi shrine participant. In very infrequent cases, the family abandons the girl or cannot afford the cost of the final rites, in which case she may remain indefinitely at the shrine. 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. In general, former Trokosi girls continue to associate themselves with the shrine into adulthood, making voluntary visits for ceremonies.

Reports on the number of women and girls bound to various Trokosi shrines vary; however, a shrine rarely has more than four Trokosis serving their atonements at any one time. According to credible reports from international observers and local leaders, there were not more than 50 girls serving at Trokosi shrines throughout the Volta Region. Reports by local leaders, district authorities, shrine priests, elders, and human rights activists indicated that the incidence of Trokosi was declining considerably.

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 areas. 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 killed if they return to their villages.

The law provides protection for alleged witches, and the Government continued to prosecute persons who committed acts of violence against suspected witches. The government-funded Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) estimates that approximately 1,090 women suspected of being witches permanently reside in camps in Yendi, Bimbilla, and Gambaga. 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. In December 2004, CHRAJ renewed its pledge to work with other stakeholders to reintegrate the alleged witches into their communities. Various organizations provide food, medical care, and other forms of support to the residents of the camps.

Human rights activists have raised concerns about prayer camps in which individuals believed to be possessed by evil spirits are chained for weeks, physically assaulted, and denied food and water. In 2003, Youth Alert Network found that 80 percent of the 50 Volta Region prayer camps it surveyed engaged in such practices. Among the victims are family members who are blamed for misfortunes and the mentally ill, some reportedly as young as 6 years old. Families send these victims to be exorcised of evil spirits. The victims are held at the camps until they are deemed to be healed. Media reports indicate that these abusive practices extend to the Greater Accra, Eastern, Central, Western, Ashanti, and Brong Ahafo regions. CHRAJ, the Department of Social Welfare, and the National Commission for Civic Education agreed to investigate, but were hindered by a lack of resources and staff. At the end of the period covered by this report, no investigations had been initiated.

There were several cases of parents who denied minors medical treatment and polio immunization because medical assistance is incompatible with their religious beliefs. In April 2005, health personnel and volunteers were unable to vaccinate children of the Jesus Christ Apostolic Faith Church at Agona Asafo against polio. Members of the church have persistently refused to allow their children to be immunized. During the same month, government authorities took a 14-year-old girl from parents who belonged to this denomination when they would not allow their daughter to have an operation to remove a potentially fatal tumor.

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

There were occasional and isolated anti-Semitic sentiments expressed in two weekly newspapers.

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 U.S. Embassy activities since 2002. In the period covered by this report, the Embassy sponsored the travel of several Muslims to the United States through the International Visitors Program. In late 2004, the Embassy hosted several Iftar programs, including one by the Ambassador. The Embassy also supported the Islamic Foundation for Peace and Development's workshop series on child rights, child education, forced child marriages, and child development.

Throughout 2004, Embassy officers hosted several events with Muslim leaders in the Accra, Kumasi, Takoradi, and Tamale regions to raise awareness of potential long-term programming and short-term project opportunities to benefit Muslim communities. To increase understanding of American values and religious freedom in the U.S., the Embassy hosted an American imam who addressed students at the two largest universities and appeared on three television shows. In Tamale, Embassy representatives visited Muslim students at a tertiary institution and later hosted an open forum on U.S. policy for a predominantly Muslim audience.

In April 2005, the Embassy hosted a human rights roundtable of NGO representatives, journalists, and public officials that covered a variety of religious freedom issues and included a focused discussion of the 2004 International Religious Freedom report on the country. Embassy officers also 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 and incidents of interreligious and intrareligious conflict. Also in April 2005, Embassy officials traveled to the Volta Region to research the Trokosi situation and discuss the practice with local contacts.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51475.htm)